THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY

15¢

STAR WESTERN

ALL STORIES NEW

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

PARTNERS THROUGH HELL AND GLORY

GREAT NOVEL OF A MONTANA GUN-PRODIGAL BY

WALT COBURN

RENEGADE WAGON SCOUT

by CLIFF FARRELL

CODY · PEARSOL · MAHAFFAY
REPP · GILMORE AND OTHERS

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STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME FOURTEEN FEBRUARY, 1938 NUMBER ONE

★ Star Novel ★

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A thousand miles off his range, Bob Hampton, Texas Ranger, bucked the freezing hell of Montana blizzards and bushwhacking riflemen—to side an outlaw. . . . For a fighting cowboy's law oath ceases to count, when the hangnoose Vigilantes turn their hell against old men and girls!

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ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS!

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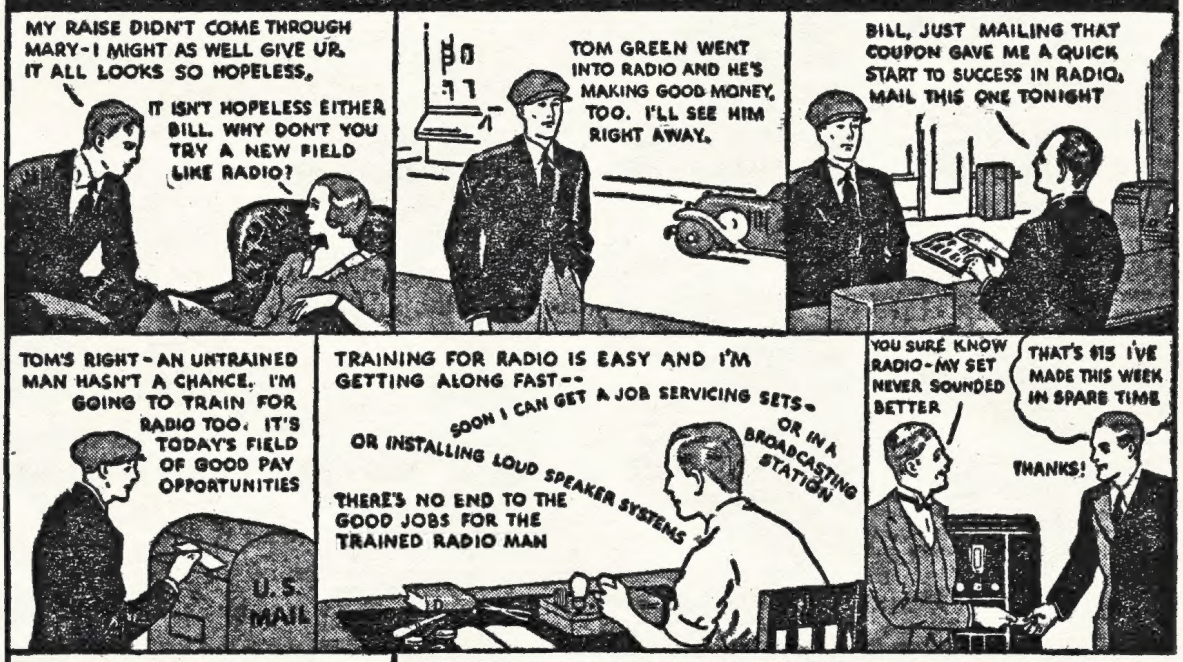
HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED-THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!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Welcome, Top-Hand

WALT COBURN, who has promised to write a full-length novel each month for *Star Western,* is an old-time cowboy. He was born and brought up on his daddy's Circle C ranch, up in Montana. With the exception of the World War years, when he was serving his country in the Air Force, he has spent his entire life in the West.

Walt's story in this issue, "Partners Through Hell and Glory," is laid in the Montana rangeland of his childhood. The bunkhouse partners and frontier neighbors of those days, and the reckless, colorful fraternity of men who rode the dim trials beyond the range of the law, come to life again in this dramatic epic by the man who knew them.

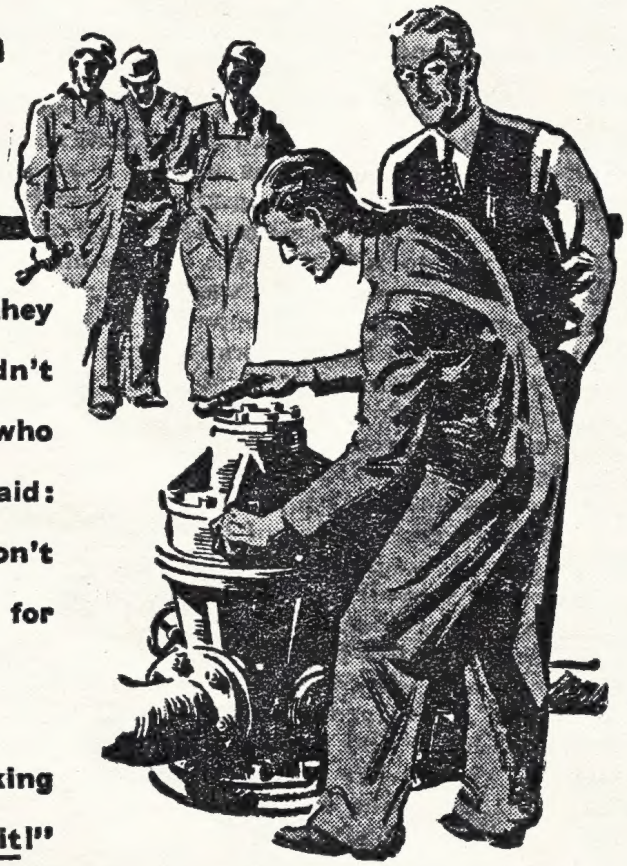
During the years before the War, Walt was a drifting cowboy, who topped the toughest broncs on ranches from Montana to the Mexican Border. He rode night-guard under the Northern Lights and the Southern Cross. For awhile he served with the Border Patrol. He had done just about everything that a roving, adventure-loving cowboy ever cared to do.

And then a too-tough bronc threw him one day. When he came out of the hospital, they told him his days with the rough string were over. It was about then that Walt started writing the thousands of stories he'd heard around the campfires. A broken leg might keep him out of the saddle for awhile, but it couldn't keep him from leading the wild, hard-riding life he loved—in fiction.

Walt has had many stories in past issues of *Star Western.* But, now that he has agreed to write a complete novel for each issue, we take the opportunity of welcoming him anew—as the top-hand of our corral!

—THE EDITORS

"My reputation as a trouble-shooter won a promotion for me"



"When something went wrong they called on me. The truth is, I didn't realize it until one day the boss, who happened to be looking on, said: 'The boys always call on you, don't they? You are in direct line for promotion.'"

●

"P.S. The boss knew I was taking an I.C.S. Course. We both knew it!"

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DEPUTY WANTED!

EPITAPH, Arizona, was noted for two things: its silver ore production and its reputation as the "town that couldn't be tamed."

Four over-ambitious and foolhardy badge-toters were permanent residents of boothill when young Bill Hardesty pinned on the sheriff's star. Yet there was an expression in his frigid, steel-gray eyes and the way he handled a .45 that won him the respect of Apache County. He was well-liked; he kept as much law along that roaring frontier as was good for it, and—this marked him as unique among Epitaph lawmen—he was still healthy and above the ground after wearing his star for three months!

Bill Hardesty was sitting in on a friendly game of poker in Epitaph's Occidental Saloon the day his deputy and friend, Ed Blanton, was killed in Taylorville, a dozen miles west. Blanton also had been playing cards, but with a newcomer—a wizened little card-sharp called Aces-Up. Aces-Up didn't know that Blanton was a deputy and Hardesty's best friend when he tried dealing from a stacked deck. Blanton's harsh accusation and challenge rang out in the Taylorville gambling house, but the shifty-eyed little tinhorn never even made a stab at the bone-handled Colt he always packed at his hip. Instead, a stingy gun—secured inside his broadcloth sleeve by an elastic—suddenly blasted. And Blanton sank face-down on the table.

It was a crude piece of business, that murder. The crowd knew it, and as angry miners encircled the crooked gambler, someone called for a rope. The noose was already about the tinhorn's neck when a red-shirted, slab-chested man remembered that Blanton had been the sheriff's best friend.

"Let's give Bill Hardesty a chance to swing the rope hisself," he shouted. "There's a telegraph pole at the foot of Bonanza Street that needs some decoratin', an' Hardesty's got more right to the job than anybody here!"

Tied hand and foot on horseback, surrounded by two dozen grim-visaged riders, the killer was prodded into the rutted main street of Epitaph. Someone went to the Occidental.

Sheriff Hardesty unhurriedly finished out his hand, excused himself and cashed in his chips. Calmly, he listened to the account of the murder.

The crowd edged forward expectantly. A catch-rope was shoved toward the sheriff, and his shrewd eyes measured the blood-hungry bunch. "You-all leave me alone with this snake for about three minutes, boys," he said, "then we'll start the fireworks."

There were rustlings of dissent. "You ain't goin' to cheat us out of a necktie party, are you, Bill?" someone asked anxiously. "If you are—"

Hardesty's face was set. "You'll have your money's worth," he promised. Then he turned and marched the prisoner into the rear of the saloon.

The crowd was swelling every minute. Mine whistles yelped their shrill notes to the azure sky. Men knocked off work and came running, their guns handy, their appetites whetted for strong drink and stronger excitement. Ten minutes later two hundred miners and cowboys, impatient and lusting for blood, rushed the back room. They found it empty, but an open window led onto an alleyway. Yelling, the man-pack made its way down the alley to the pool-hall which was known as the sheriff's unofficial office. Their guess was a good one.

There were cries and shouts; curses and threats. Someone in the mob let fly with his six-shooter and a window crashed in the building. Then the door opened. Sheriff Hardesty came out onto the sagging wooden porch. He held a sawed-off ten-gauge scattergun loosely in the crook of his arm. His eyes, like gray arctic ice, swept the mob, as he raised his voice to still them.

He spoke slowly at first, the deep resonance of his words filling the street. He spoke of murders which had been committed, of killings, of hold-ups and rustling which had gone unpunished. He spoke the name of

his dead friend, Deputy Ed Blanton, and told what a promising lawman he'd been, and how the whole county would miss him.

"Bring out that low-crawlin' snake that murdered him, Bill!" came a whiskey-thick voice.

Sheriff Hardesty interrupted himself. "I'm ready to die," he said slowly. "I have been since I started wearing this badge. Maybe I'll die now, to keep a half-drunk mob from stringing up a gent who'll go to hell on a rope soon enough, anyhow. But if I do die"—and the shotgun came up, its twin bores arcing in a slow curve—"I'll promise you that I'll take at least three of you with me. You can elect your own three right now, any way you like. If you want to hear me out, then shut up and keep back!"

It was quite a funeral oration that Sheriff Hardesty gave his dead deputy. He didn't say much about the manner of his death, but kept driving home, with homely dry wit and with familiar, intimate illustration, just what the law itself had always meant to Ed Blanton.

"So you fellers can see," he said, "that Ed's death leaves me in a tight spot. This county is maybe the toughest place along the whole frontier for a man to raise a family. Gunmen and drunks shove decent men off the sidewalks. Games run crooked. The bodies of honest miners—men like yourselves, who want fair play—are found at sunrise, robbed an' murdered. I'll handle most of it, but one man can't cover the whole county at one time. So it's up to you fellers to help me out. What this county needs most is less hell—and more silver an' cattle!"

He knew his audience, did Bill Hardesty. He knew the exact moment to make those men—who but a few moments before were ruthless wolves, howling for the kill—smile and laugh; when to make their rough, bearded faces frown darkly, and when to bring a suspicious brightness to their eyes.

Then he held up his hand. "This is your county—your homes, men," Bill said. "We got to all do our part to keep it fit to live in. As I told you, Ed Blanton's death makes it tough for one man to keep peace over this two hundred square miles." Then he smiled. "So I'm goin' to swear you all in as deputy sheriffs. The pay will be nothin' a year, an' double on Sundays. But you'll have the satisfaction of knowin' that you're doin' the kind of job Ed Blanton would have done. All them that don't want to be swore can go!"

Not a man moved.

"Raise yore right hands," said Sheriff Bill Hardesty. They did, and he administered the oath. No one actually saw Bill Hardesty set his shotgun against the building wall; no one saw him take a deep breath of relief. But everybody heard him when he shouted, "All right, boys—the sheriff buys the drinks for the best law-posse in the territory!"

There was a general rush toward the Occidental—with Sheriff Bill Hardesty, grinning like a school-kid, bringing up the drag.

It was fourth drink time when a man scratched his head, and turned to the sheriff. "Say, Bill—seems we were set for a necktie party a while ago. Where the hell is Aces-Up? We still got a hangin' job to do!"

Sheriff Hardesty tossed off his glass of whiskey neat before answering. "That murderin' tinhorn," he said slowly, "was taken out the back way an' to jail by the poolroom man while I was acquirin' me a lot of new deputies in front. It's a mighty strong jail, as some of you have reason to know. An' Aces-Up hasn't a chance to escape, because there are a hundred damn good lawmen just waitin' for him to try. He hasn't a chance of bein' hanged without due process of law an' a just trial, because a hundred honest deputies have took their solemn oath before God to uphold the law of this territory. An' we'll all have free seats to the hangin' . . . But first we'll have another drink—on the house!"

A hundred lawmen—or that portion of them who could pack themselves inside the spacious Occidental saloon—did just that!

—THE MAVERICK.

Partners Through

By Walt Coburn

It was typical of Bob Hampton, Texan, to ride a thousand miles, braving alone the freezing hell of blizzards and bushwhacking outlaws, to help out a partner—though it would take even more than two men's courage and guns to win out against the renegade legion who had sworn to wreck the great Gunsight range!

Complete dramatic novel of the Montana cattle ranges—and the men who rode them!

Hell and Glory •

Wade and O'Banion made for a nest of boulders, with Wade helping up the last of the Irish Kings.

THE notched peak of Gunsight Pass gave Bob Hampton his bearings long before the brunt of the storm struck, so he had no feeling of being lost even when the blizzard blotted out all landmarks. He had shot an antelope that morning and carried two quarters of the meat lashed on his pack horse, the meat already frozen and fit to eat. The rough badlands country with its scrub timber, its rimrock caves, its cut coulees where the dry grass was stirrup high, gave feed for his two horses. He could hole up here for a week without fear of starvation or freezing to death.

He was riding right now on the Gun-

sight range which Wade French had described in his letter. So it wasn't fear of the blizzard that gripped his heart—it was the delay he'd be forced into if he made camp. Now, every hour, almost every minute counted. He must get to the Gunsight Ranch in time!

He'd burned Wade French's letter after he'd read it to get the directions. But more than that, he could read between the lines the things Wade French had not dared put on paper. And Bob Hampton had followed Wade's instructions to destroy the letter, though the wording of the letter seemed innocent and guiltless enough to the casual reader. The only message the letter conveyed was to offer Bob Hampton a job as ramrod for the Gunsight outfit. It also described the country and how to get there, the ranches along the way where he could get grub or a fresh horse if he needed one. It was written in Wade French's gay happy-go-lucky manner, and without a single mention of danger—only that the writer could use a good ramrod. That the job was right in Bob's line.

Bob knew what had taken his old friend Wade French to the Gunsight range in Montana a few years ago. News had trickled down the cattle trail and back to Texas that Wade French had found trouble up north. But Wade hadn't sent for Bob until now, and the letter was almost a month getting to its destination. Written across the end of the letter was a single sentence, meaningless to anyone but Bob Hampton.

"Treat this, Bob, as we treated Manda's rag doll."

MANDA was Amanda French, Wade's young sister, and the sentence referred to a childhood incident that Wade knew Bob would remember, when they had played cowboy and Injun with Manda and her tow-headed twin brother, Ray. Manda and Ray were the emigrants crossing the plains, and Wade and Bob Hampton painted Injuns. The "Injuns" had captured the wagon train—consisting of a homemade red wagon, hauled by two balky hounds. Manda and little Ray had been tied to saplings, both indignant and tearfully complaining that the ropes were tied too tight. Wade and Bob had looted the wagon while the dog team chewed at the harness, scratched fleas, and finally lay down to sleep in their tangle of straps and rope tugs. The two painted Injuns robbed the wagon of the supply of cookies and apples and homemade candy. They climaxed the warlike atrocities by tying Manda's rag doll to a willow stake and setting it afire, amid the wailing of Manda and her twin Ray.

This childhood incident had occurred fifteen years before, at Fort Stockton. There Major French, then a captain of cavalry, had been stationed, and there Bob Hampton, son of Texas Ranger Captain Jim Hampton, had been sent to school.

Now, fifteen years later, came the instructions with the letter to "treat this as we treated Manda's rag doll." Wade French knew that his childhood chum would remember, even if the memory of Manda French might be like the thrust of a dull knife in Bob's heart. Wade was, after a manner typical of his nature, ignoring or discounting his younger sister Manda's treatment of Bob Hampton.

Wade had never believed, as Major French and Manda had, that Bob Hampton had shot and killed wild young Ray French in a border cantina fight a few years ago. It was an ugly drunken brawl, starting with young Lieutenant Ray French, young Lieutenant Giles Karnes, and some other young officers from the fort who had been making a night of it. When some Texas cowpunchers came in, there were not enough dancing partners to supply both the soldiers and cowhands. Trouble flared when one of the señoritas

made a jealous play between Ray French or Giles Karnes and the free spending cowpunchers.

Guns were drawn and the proprietor sent out a call for rangers. Texas Ranger Bob Hampton, on duty along the border and in town that night, answered the call. When the gunsmoke had thinned and the crash of .45's died out, young Lieutenant Ray French lay dead with a bullet through his heart.

At the trial, Lieutenant Giles Karnes had testified under oath that he had seen Ranger Bob Hampton fire the shot that killed Ray French. Bob, on crutches and slowly recovering from three bullet wounds, denied that he'd shot Ray French. But Karnes told that they had seen Ray French go down and had seen the ranger's gun spitting fire. Most damaging of all was the testimony regarding the row between Ray French and Ranger Bob Hampton an hour earlier, there in the same cantina.

For Bob had found young Ray and his soldier companions there, all in civilian clothes, and had cautioned them about starting trouble. Ray French had lost his temper. He called Bob a fighting name and told him that his tin star didn't rate him higher than a stable hand in the army. Bob had knocked Ray French down and walked out of the place, with Ray calling after him to have a gun in his hand when he came back to the cantina.

It was a nasty, ugly mess. Nor was it helped by the bitter feeling between the army men and rangers, due to disagreements between the army and the Texas Ranger forces in handling border problems. Also, young Lieutenant Ray French was the apple of Major French's eye, and the Major had condemned Ranger Bob Hampton. He'd called Bob a swaggering, cow-punching Texan who, from behind his ranger badge, had killed an officer and gentleman of the United States cavalry. That's the way Bob, in flannel shirt, overalls and high-heeled boots had looked, compared with the trimly tailored uniformed young Giles Karnes and the other officers there in the courtroom.

And Hampton's defense on the stand was none too strong or convincing.

"The fightin' was thick and fast," he'd said. "I had to do a little head clubbin'. I never aimed at ary man when I pulled the trigger of my six-shooter. I shot a time or two over their heads to scare 'em, but I never shot Ray French or ary other man mixed up in that fight. As for the little ruckus me'n Ray had earlier, it didn't count. Ray was drunk on that rotten cantina mescal and tequila. He didn't know what he was sayin' or doin'. I had taken a gun away from him and slapped his ears down. If he'd lived to sober up, Ray would have come around like the man he was and told me he'd acted like a fool kid. I thought as much of Ray French as any of you. The Major is too heartbroke right now to realize that, I reckon. That's all I got to say, gentlemen."

That was what Bob Hampton told the jury.

WADE FRENCH was the first to congratulate Bob Hampton when the jury exonerated him. But Major French and Wade's sister Manda avoided him. They felt bitter toward Wade for siding with Bob Hampton. More than that, Wade had turned down an army career to learn the cattle business, for he and Bob had planned, since boyhood, to go into the cattle business, and go together up the Chisholm Trail to Montana.

Later, Major French had been transferred to Fort Bear Paw in Montana. A widower, the Major had taken his daughter Manda with him. But Wade French had stayed in Texas, making good money, and as honest as the average cowhand along the border who makes a living handling Mexican stuff.

Then about two years ago Wade French had shown Bob a letter from the Major. The Major had bought an interest in the Gunsight Ranch, up in Montana, and he wanted Wade to come up and handle it for him.

The outfit belonged to Pete Thiebault, Jack Wolff, and Juan Elias, besides Major French and Lieutenant Giles Karnes. Good money could be made, Major French believed by supplying Montana army posts with beef.

Wade French had pointed out the names. He'd said, "I sure remember Thiebault, Wolff and that Mex, Elias, when you, Bob, ran 'em out of this part of Texas. And those are the three cattle rustlers that my dad — who don't know one brand from another—has thrown in with. Bob, I'm goin' to Montana to get the old Major out of this mess. It looks like our little partnership is doomed to die on the vine, Bobert. I can't let the Major down. So-long, and keep your badge polished!"

"If you need any kind of help up yonder, Wade, just holler," Bob told him. "I'll come a-runnin'. Mebby you'll have to smoke out them three renegades with a little gunpowder. Thiebault, Wolff and Elias was all in the cantina the night that Ray was shot. I'd just weaned 'em away from a bunch of wet cattle they'd tried to cross. So if you ever do send for me I could sort of take my badge-polishin' work right along with me. So-long, Wade. When you need me, just let out a holler."

Wade French grinned at that. "It's the Major's jack-pot, not mine," he said. "And you sure don't owe him anything but hard feelin's, Bobert. When you go to bat for a man that accused you of murder. . . . Hell, Bob—"

"We've been partners since we was li'l' ol' buttons together, Wade," Bob said quietly. "Nothin' changes that. Hell, didn't we take our Barlow knives and whittle a cut on our arms and each suck the other's blood and take a Injun oath in the shadow of the Alamo to die a-fightin' back to back? Go on up the trail to Montana, partner. Quit a-frettin'. I'll be watchin' the pinnacles for your smoke signal."

After many long months the letter had come.

And at the ranches beyond the Yellowstone, Bob Hampton began hearing vague, ugly rumors that tied up the Gunsight outfit to crooked beef contracts and cattle rustling, and one or two mysterious killings.

Now, within half a day's ride of where he reckoned the Gunsight ranch to be, it was already getting dusk. But the blizzard made it tough riding. Bob Hampton's horse and the pack animal that carried his bed and a outfit were trying to swing their rumps to the storm. It was Bob's first blizzard, though he'd ridden out many a Texas norther of a bleak winter.

He reckoned he'd better camp for the night, hole up till the storm quit. He wiped the snow from his eyes and peered about for a suitable camping place that offered shelter.

Then the sound of a shot startled him. He pulled to a halt, shoved back the flaps of his muskrat cap. Again came the sound of a shot, muffled by the storm.

CHAPTER TWO

Hostages of the Blizzard

THE stinging, wind-whipped snow was so thick that Bob Hampton could see not more than a few hundred feet ahead. The wind and muffled echoes confused any sounds, twisting them, distorting their direction, so that he was a little bewildered. Off somewhere beyond the opaque white curtain of wind-driven snow he made out the sound of shod hoofs clattering over rocky frozen ground. He heard

more shots, their echoes flung back by the rough hills. And then came a hoarse voice shouting in Mexican.

"Anda! Anda! Anda!"

Bob Hampton pulled the mitten from his right hand and his numbed fingers gripped the butt of his six-shooter. The sound of retreating hoofs died in the distance. Then there was only the silence of the badlands and the whine of the north wind through the scrub pines. Bob rode forward cautiously, his bed horse following. Somewhere ahead he heard the uneasy snorting of a horse and the creak of saddle leather. Then a man's grunting moan.

For a minute the storm slacked off, thinning the curtain of snow. Then Bob saw a saddled horse standing with dropped bridle reins, and on the ground was a man moving with a painful hitching, crablike movement toward the spooky horse. The horse kept moving sideways, away from the man. He was trying to get to his feet, but he fell, moaning and cussing. The man had not yet sighted Bob.

"Whoa, boy, whoa," he called to the frightened horse, "Whoa, ye son av Satan. Would ye be runnin' off, now, to lave the man that's fed ye since ye was born? Would ye be ingrate enough to quit the man that raised ye, now? They've shot the hell outa me, but if ye'll—" Then the man on the ground sighted Bob and dragged out his gun.

"Hold your fire, mister!" called Bob. "Don't shoot, man! I'm not one of that outfit that shot you!"

"Mebby not. Mebby ye ain't one of that murderin' Gunsight spread. But keep your hands up when ye come nearer. If it's croakin' I am, I'll go out a-shootin'!" The man spoke with an unmistakable Irish brogue.

Bob rode forward with his hands held up to the level of his shoulders. "If you'll let me get down, mister," he said, "I'll try to patch you up before you bleed to death. I'm not one of the Gunsight outfit. I'm a plumb stranger up in Montana."

The man on the ground stared up at him with pain-squinted blue eyes. His frost-marked face was covered with reddish-gray beard. His coonskin coat was patched here and there with new skins. His black angora chaps were old and hard used. A bright green knit muffler was wrapped around the man's throat and tied behind his neck. Despite the fact that the man was suffering, he managed a grin when he saw that Bob meant him no harm. The hard, dangerous coldness of his blue eyes softened.

"There's a bottle, lad, in me saddle pocket. Beware of the beast's hind feet. He's wicked as sin and treacherous as Judas. Ye seen how he was after leavin' me to die. And him with a belly full of me own hay and grain to boot! Fetch the bottle, lad. I'd hate to cash in me chips without a last nip av the stuff."

When Bob brought the quart bottle that was wrapped in a buckskin sheath, the wounded man insisted on his rescuer taking the first drink.

"Let it not be said, lad, that the last of the Irish kings had the bad manners to take the first nip from his own horn. Make haste with the cork. And go aisy. Ye'll be welcome to what's left in the bottle after I croak. Drink to the confusion av the enemies of Michael O'Banion, the last av the Irish kings."

MICHAEL O'BANION had escaped death by a miracle. A bullet had torn through his fur cap, cutting a furrow in his scalp. A second bullet had entered his chest muscle without smashing any bones.

Bob got the blood flow stopped, while Michael O'Banion sat up, the bottle in his hand, cursing the Gunsight outfit.

"Now let's get those chaps off and have a look at your leg," said Bob, buttoning

the mangy looking coonskin coat about the little old Irishman's shivering shoulders.

"Never mind the leg, lad. It's broke again. And it's a job for a carpenter. Here, hold me bottle."

Reaching over, he gave a tug to the overshoe on his left foot. From the leg of the chaps he yanked an artificial leg made of cork with thin steel braces.

"I got it from a wagon peddler," he grunted disgustedly. "It was too damn' long, so I give it to Sing Fat to tinker with. An' he got the hinges on backward! There wasn't time to take 'er apart before I left the ranch. So when I try to walk, she buckles and throws me. My horse throwed me when they bushwhacked me. And there I was, tryin' to run fer them rocks yonder, with them devils a throwin' lead at me. And this damn' hootnanny leg actin' up like a bronc. While me right leg was doin' its best to run me away from them, this cork contraption was headin' back at 'em. It would make a comical story now, eh, lad? Let's have another nip. Then we'll make the old trapper camp near here. Would ye mind tellin' a man who ye are and whet ye might be doin' on this range? Plain it is ye're no Gunsight man or ye'd have put a slug av lead in me belly."

"I'm just a driftin' cowhand," Bob gave a cautious reply. He helped Michael O'Banion get the unruly artificial leg strapped on. And he got the wounded man back on his half-broken sorrel gelding.

"Looks like you'd ride gentle stock, mister," he ventured. "Though that's as likely lookin' geldin' as I ever saw."

"That's just it!" complained the last of the Irish kings. "Too good a horse for these bronc-stompers to be spoilin'. I'd had in mind just a short ride, but a queer bit av dirty business fetched me over onto the Gunsight range. The shootin' and the smell av blood spooked the baby. Sure, ye can't blame the colt 'cause he ain't broke to guns. He throwed me, first jump. Ye like the looks av Shamrock? He's yours, lad. And a miserable enough present to a boy that's saved the life av the last av the Irish kings. No argymint about it, now. I'm too old and handicapped by this store leg to be forkin' skittish broncs. He ain't worth a damn, and it's a good riddance when I'm shut av him!"

They camped that night at a deserted trapper's cabin in the badlands. They broiled antelope steaks and drank strong black coffee. The bottle of Irish whiskey was put away "for emergency." Outside the barn and log cabin that sheltered horses and the two men, the blizzard whined and howled. And Michael O'Banion, self-named last of the Irish kings, talked as he lay on Bob's blankets.

But his talk carefully circled any direct mention of the Gunsight outfit. And Bob was loathe to ask questions for fear of rousing the older man's suspicions and causing him to shut up altogether.

Michael O'Banion's talk, for the most part, was about the breeding and raising of fine horses, and of the great horses of Ireland. Also, of his daughter, Nora, who was a better hand with a green horse than any bronc rider in Montana or any other part of the cow-country.

"Poor Nora," said Michael O'Banion, after he had taken a small nip from his bottle. "She'll never marry. A pity it is, for she's a heart av gold. But her looks are misfit, poor creature. Her hair's the color of sickly carrots, her skin coarse and freckled from the sun and wind. Horse-faced, you might call the poor thing, with a loose-jointed, ganglin' gait that quite ain't a pace and it still falls short of a fox-trot. Sort av cow-hocked, ye might say. She had an aunt the same way. I've seen her portrait in the auld castle when I was a broth av a lad. And many's the time I've wiped away the bit av a tear fer her, a-lookin' down, so homely and barren av beauty, save for the

Irish blue av her fine eyes. And her the finest horsewoman in all av Ireland! 'Tis for her that me own Nora is named. And she's like her in looks and her way with a colt. Poor Nora." Michael O'Banion drew the back of his hand across his eyes and took another nip. Then he put the bottle away again for another emergency.

"Isn't there a Major French with the Gunsight outfit?" Bob finally managed to broach the subject warily.

"Aye, lad. He's the kingpin av the thievin' pack. Him and that young Lieutenant Karnes. 'Tis them two as handles the paper work and the smart shenanigans for the fat beef contracts. While Thiebault and Wolff and Elias do the actual dirty work av rustlin' and brand changin'."

"I've heard of Wade French," said Bob carelessly.

"And just what is it," said Michael O'Banion sharply, "that ye've heard av him?"

"He was rated as a top cowhand down along the Mexican border, where I come from."

"A fast cowhand, aye. And quick with a gun. But I doubt if he'll be taken alive —not with enemies av the Gunsight outfit a-ridin' in the law posse that's lost somewhere right now in these rough hills. Though I have me doubts and the backin' av me daughter Nora in me guess that it wasn't Wade French that killed Bill Gillis and his son when they was ridin' of a moonlight night along the wagon road to their ranch.

"More likely it was them three same divils that was shootin' at me an hour ago. Thinkin' they'd killed me, they rode off. That bullet that hit me head knocked me black-dizzy and I laid there, quiet as a lump. But whilst the Shamrock colt was buckin' me off, I'd swear I sighted Pete Thiebault and Wolff, and heard Juan Elias spoutin' his heathen Mexican. Them's three murderin' snakes! And Nora backs me judgment when I say that for all he's the whelp av a crooked army major, young Wade French is no coward that shoots men in the back from the brush.

"Between you and me, there's queer goin's on amongst them Gunsight thieves since Wade French come up from Texas. When the posse stopped by my ranch last week, I refused to join 'em. With Nora backin' me, I told 'em I'd have no part av man-huntin' a poor devil and shootin' him down. There's men in that same pack av vigilantes that's as handy with long rope and runnin' iron as Elias or Thiebault, but it's Major French they're all a-blamin'. And Wade is the son av that crooked Army officer. So they're huntin' Wade French down like he's a wild beast, to shoot him down in his tracks. And it's murder when—"

He stopped suddenly as Bob stepped to

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the closed and bolted door of the cabin.

IT was pitch dark outside, and the wind howled dismally. Inside the cabin the fire in the stone fireplace threw shadows into the corners. Michael O'Banion, a gun in his hand, hitched himself to a corner near the door.

Bob, his gun in his right hand, his left hand on the heavy wooden latch, listened to muffled sounds outside. He was glad that a thick coating of white frost made the panes of the cabin's one window almost opaque so that nobody could see in from the outside.

Bob felt something heavy thud against the door. He nodded to O'Banion. Then he pulled the door inward with a sudden jerk.

Two figures stumbled headlong into the cabin and fell sprawling. Bob was on top of one, knocking the gun from the man's hand, while Michael O'Banion sprang on the other fur coated form that lay feebly moving.

The man pinned under Bob's weight fought for a minute or two with desperate fury. Then he suddenly went limp. From the bearded face came a shaky, almost hysterical laugh.

"Bobert, you old badge polisher!"

There was little about this bearded, frost blackened, half frozen man save his voice to identify him as Wade French. His bloodshot eyes were swollen to slits, red rimmed. The cheekbones above the ragged beard were scabbed and black from frostbite. Wade French's lips were black, cracked open. As his unsteady laugh filled the cabin, his head sagged and he lay like a dead man on the floor.

"Where's the whiskey?"

Michael O'Banion didn't answer. He was fumbling at the frogs of the fur coat that was far too large for the white faced girl who was talking in a croaking whisper, her deep blue eyes wide with alarm.

"I'm all right. . . . Look after Wade—before it's too late to save him. He's frozen—starved. This is his coat. One he took away from a posseman. Get to work on Wade!"

But Bob had the bottle and was holding the neck of it against Wade French's clenched teeth.

Wade's swollen eyes blinked open. He grinned at the red haired girl who, freed of the big fur coat, was trying to stand up.

"We made it, eh, Nora? It was your prayers, sure enough, and answered like one of Grimm's fairy tales. For unless I'm snowblind, there stands before us none other than Michael O'Banion, the last of the Irish kings. The big, handsome cuss with the black hair and red ears is Bob Hampton of the Texas Rangers who cut his milk teeth on the barrel of a six-shooter. If this ain't old home week I'm Sing Fat's Chinee brother. Bob, this lady with the red nose is the horse-faced, cow-hocked, misfit daughter of the last of the Irish kings. Michael, how about a nip from the horn. A drop or two of your shamrock dew would set me back on my fightin' legs. Bob, outside are two of the gamest hearted horses that ever saved human lives. Could you put 'em in the barn? I'd lend a hand, only my legs don't track yet. And if you don't believe there's a God, ask Nora O'Banion about Him and her prayer back yonder in the blizzard!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Shamrock Pool Prepares to Fight

"MICHAEL O'BANION," said Wade French, swallowing broiled antelope meat and washing it down with black coffee, "and Nora, were the only two people in this part of the country I could trust when I got up here. The other outfits are either too bitter with hatred to listen, or they're hand in glove with Thiebault, Wolff and Elias. I couldn't get Michael and Nora mixed into it because those snakes would strike at

'em, like they did today, Michael, when they tried to kill you. And the vigilantes would burn Nora like they burned witches in old Salem if they found out she'd taken grub to me in the hills. That's how the blizzard caught her, Bob.

"I didn't dare risk the noise of a shot to kill meat. I'd roped a calf and butchered it a few days ago and almost got caught when they picked up my sign. I'm not handy at this outlaw game. They framed me on that killin' of Bill Gillis and his big, ornery son, though they both needed killin'. Now the law is after me. With me on the dodge or killed off, Thiebault, Wolff and Elias have clear sailin' here with their beef business. Right now, they're deliverin' stolen beef once a week at the army posts. And the hide inspection is a damned farce because the inspectors are bought off. It's the biggest rustlin' job you ever saw worked, Bob. And if you try to break it up, they outlaw you as they did me last week.

"I'm tellin' it to you straight, partner, because I want you to turn back from here. Your Ranger badge is only tin in Montana, Bobert, polished as it might be. Things didn't look so black when I sent you that note. There was a chance then, to wipe 'em out. But now it's hopeless. The deal's off. There's too many sittin' in the game. The cards are all marked. Michael O'Banion was almost murdered because he refused to throw in with the posse that was huntin' me down. Michael, I'm sorry I dragged you and Nora into this mess. You—"

"We were into it before you came to Montana," said Nora O'Banion who was neither horse-faced nor cow-licked but just about the best looking girl Bob Hampton had ever laid eyes on. "Into it deeper than a bogged cow. You got back the big bunch of brood mares they stole from us before you even knew us, after dad had ridden to the Post and called Major French a cattle rustler. I'd met you once on the range and when you told me your name, I called you a rustler and a few other pet names I'd picked up around the round-up camps." She turned to Bob, her blue eyes dancing.

"Wade showed up at daybreak one morning, hazing fifty head of half-thoroughbred brood mares and the big Irish stud Brian. He corralled 'em, whistling *The Wearin' of the Green.* I bawled like a kid. The last of the Irish kings pulled the cork on a bottle and while Sing Fat flipped flapjacks, we formed what Wade calls the Shamrock Pool."

"I'd be proud," grinned Bob, "to throw in with you."

"It's too late," said Wade. "Bob, if you'll help Nora and her dad drift their stock to a new range, help 'em locate somewhere—"

"Look here," Bob cut in, "Leavin' Michael O'Banion and Nora out of it, why is it too late now for you and me to clean up on the Gunsight spread? Before I quit Texas, I saw the Ranger captain, and we talked it over with the United States Marshal at El Paso. I've got bench warrants for Thiebault, Wolff and Elias. And unofficial orders to take 'em dead if it's easier thataway. I'll see your sheriff here and force his hand. I didn't ride from the Mexican line to be bluffed by a pack of two-bit thieves."

"Spoken," said Michael O'Banion, "like a Dublin patriot. Is there Irish blood in your veins, Bob?"

"Bob Hampton," grinned Wade, "is part Injun, the rest of him is mostly cougar, crossed here and there with scorpion, Gila monster, tarantular and some curly wolf. Vacation times at high school he spent shooting bronco Mexicans. But he prefers red soda pop to good Irish likker, so don't waste any more on him!"

BEHIND Wade French's bloodshot eyes Bob caught a look of pleading or warning that was mixed with fear.

He'd never seen that expression before in the eyes of his boyhood partner. He didn't like it. But he didn't question Wade now. It was an hour later he met Wade at the barn where they had gone on a pretense of looking after the horses they had stabled there.

"Let's have it, Wade," he said. "Somethin's gone wrong as hell. I reckon you kin tell me without stutterin', partner."

"I wish I could, Bob. There are some things going on here that I won't even let myself believe. Dad's no thief. But on the other hand, when I've shown him proof that Thiebault and Wolff and Elias were selling stolen beef on the contracts Giles Karnes, supply officer at the Fort, obtained for the Gunsight outfit, dad refused to back me, even when I told him I'd drag those three cattle thieves up before the law and send 'em to the pen. Major French has a fine Army record, Bob. He's no coward; he showed that in the Indian campaigns. But he's plenty scared of those three men that are his partners in the Gunsight outfit. He sanctions their damned rustling."

"Then they have somethin' on him," said Bob flatly. Since he had grown old enough to size men up, Bob had always suspected a weak streak in the make-up of the straight backed cavalry officer who had been the hero of numerous skirmishes with the Indians. Major French had married a girl of wealth, and considered it no disgrace to spend her money with the same prodigal recklessness that he gambled his inadequate Army pay across the poker table. Then, too, the too-handsome cavalry officer had been almighty popular with the ladies. Married to the most beautiful girl at Washington, yet he had openly flirted with other girls. He drank just a little too much, gambled for higher stakes than he could afford, and carried it off with a reckless laugh and a swagger.

Bob was not surprised when Michael O'Banion had called Major French crooked. He hated now to hurt Wade, the best friend he had on earth, for Wade believed in his father. Or made a gallant pretense to the world that he did.

"Some old scrape, mebby," he eased the brutality of his accusation against the officer. "Some fool thing your dad might have done years ago, down on the border when he was younger and wild in his ways."

"I don't know, Bob. All I know is that he's takin' his cut of the profits from the big beef contracts. And he's told me either to take my orders from Pete Thiebault or pull out. Thiebault raised plenty hell when he saw me show at the ranch. He and the Major had a big ruckus about it. I stayed on as a common cowhand. Theibault staked me to a string of pack horses that couldn't keep up when he led a long circle on the round-up. And three of the string were green broncs that weren't even bridle wise. I bought a string of horses from Michael O'Banion who raises the best horses in Montana, and I wasn't afoot from then on.

"I learned most of the tricks Thiebault is usin'. He's got a bag full, cowboy. He's a smooth brand worker, and he's been caught a few times. But the men who caught him never lived to tell about it. Thiebault, Wolff or Elias never ride alone. They ride together or with some of their Gunsight men along to back their play."

"Those are the men that are framin' you, Wade?"

"Those, Bobert," laughed Wade bitterly, "are the three brave hombres who bushwhacked Bill Gillis and his whiskey-guzzlin' son Sam. And then they sent the law to hunt me down and kill me where they trapped me."

"It don't look like Major French would stand for that. After all, you're his son."

"Yes. Yes, I'm his son, Bob. I'm afraid he'll do something desperate. I

sent word to him by Giles. I took a long chance and slipped back to the Fort the night I learned the law was after me. I told Giles to look after dad. Not let him do anything he'd regret. That I'd quit the country when the sign was right, and after I'd taken care of Thiebault and his two compadres. I gave Giles a note to give dad. In it I told dad to sit tight and say nothin'. You see, there's Manda to consider. Any sort of disgrace would about kill her. I know you must hate her, Bob, but she and Ray were twins. She worshipped the kid, for all his wild ways. Don't blame her too much, partner."

"She and the Major still believe I shot Ray?"

"I'm afraid they do, Bob."

BOB grinned faintly. "Let's make some war medicine. Is there any place around here where you kin hide out for a spell?"

"There's a big cave almost in the notch of Gunsight Pass. Nora took me there. The Indians know about it, but I don't think there's a white man in the country could find it. Nora stand aces with the Injuns around here. They took her into the Assiniboine tribe. Her Injun godfather showed her the cave years ago. We were headed for there when the storm struck us. I could hide out there for weeks."

"Good. Who's your sheriff around here?"

"Al Hammond—saloonman and gambler. Fast as a strikin' rattler with a gun and crooked as snake tracks. He's in on the beef contract steal, so count him out."

"Just so I know how the law stands," nodded Bob. "We count Sheriff Hammond out. I want you to get up to that cave, partner, and stay there. Take Michael O'Banion with you."

"Take Michael?"

"Exactly. The three gents that bushwhacked him left him for dead, so the last of the Irish kings plays dead for a while."

"That leaves Nora alone at the Shamrock ranch!"

"Not quite. There's the Chinee cook, Sing Fat. O'Banion tells me that he's some ducks as a gun slinger."

"Crowd that old heathen, Bob, and he's a mess of hornets," grinned Wade. "But you don't savvy. There's a hundred head of good brood mares and a stud imported straight from Ireland. Besides a cavvy of about two hundred head of broke cow horses and two year old bronc geldin's. The Shamrock cavvy is the best in the country and pickin's for rustlers. Besides the cattle in the Shamrock iron."

"Hasn't O'Banion got ary cowhands he kin trust?"

"Half a dozen. The Gunsight has twenty-five or thirty."

"Half a dozen men, if they're good, makes a-plenty. I'll take a whirl at runnin' this Shamrock spread, if O'Banion and Nora will trust me. You and the last of the Irish kings just hole up at your Injun cave and roundside a spell. Good chance for you to git real acquainted with your future daddy-in-law."

Wade French's face was too covered by whiskers and frost scabs to show that he had reddened.

"When did you take up mind readin', you badge-polishin' Mexican? Ain't she just about all the aces in the deck, Bob?"

"Horse-faced and cow-hocked," chuckled Bob, with a fair imitation of Michael O'Banion's brogue. "Like her Aunt Nora. The poor creature. The little ol' rascal had me feelin' sorry for her."

"One of Michael's standard jokes. Her Aunt Nora was a noted beauty as well as the best horsewoman in all Ireland. But she can't see me for dust, Bob. She hated me at first, or pretended to. Now she just makes fun of me when I tell her I want to marry her. Treats me like a kid. I'd rather she hated me."

"No. No, you wouldn't want it that way, feller."

Wade knew that Bob was thinking of Manda. He quickly changed the subject.

"You and Nora will go back to the ranch?"

"With O'Banion's horse. Blood on O'Banion's saddle. I may jail those three gents for the murder of Michael O'Banion. Keep 'em on ice till I get a chance to work around the range some. How long will this storm last?"

"Old timers and dam' fools predict the weather. I'm no old timer but this is early October and winter don't set in for a month yet. I'd make a guess we'll see the sun tomorrow."

"When is the next beef delivery at the Fort?"

"In a few days. There should be two hundred head of steers now at the Gunsight ranch ready for delivery. It's a day's drive."

"Who's the brand inspector?"

"Sheriff Al Hammond."

"Who takes delivery?"

"Captain Giles Karnes." Wade scowled uneasily.

"So Karnes has his captain's bars?"

Wade nodded. He acted as if he wanted to say something but did not know how to put it in the right words. Bob relieved him of the ordeal.

"Manda sort of taken to Karnes before they left Texas."

"They're to be married Christmas, Bob. I'm sorry as hell."

"Don't be, son. I don't want sympathy. I never was raised to like it. Let's go to the cabin." He picked up the smoky lantern.

THE storm seemed to be slacking off. The wind had died out and the snow was falling more softly. The air seemed warmer.

"We'd better pull out," said Bob, "while there's snow fallin' to cover our tracks by daylight. How close to the cave do you get by horseback?"

"The cave is on the mountain just above the Shamrock ranch. You can ride up to within half a mile of it. Then it's a goat climb afoot."

"O'Banion with that cork leg couldn't make much of a climb," said Bob.

"Unless the place is watched, we can stop at his place and get his old wooden peg-leg. With that he makes any two legged man half his age plumb ashamed, either afoot or horseback. He'll swarm up that mountain like a squirrel. The cave looks down on the Shamrock ranch buildings. With my field glasses we can watch what goes on down there, likewise get a good view of the country all around. If you want to communicate with me, use the old Injun smoke signals we made up as kids. Remember 'em, Bob?"

"Like I remembered what happened to Manda's rag doll, partner. Mind how she caught onto the code and made us take her and Ray into the tribe? Then we made her a squaw and fastened travois on the hounds to make 'em drag the camp outfit when we moved. Ray had to dance the torture sun dance to git his eagle feathers. And Manda had to do the squaw work like roastin' spuds and corn. Served her plumb right for spyin' on us warriors and learnin' about smoke signals. She made a right purty little Injun, with her black hair in braids and her skin tanned and painted with red chalk. . . . Wade, I got a notion Manda ain't marryin' this Captain Karnes next Christmas. We can't let no Injun marry thataway outside the tribe."

"You mean that, Bob?"

"I reckon I do, Wade. I never liked that tin soldier, Karnes, even before he tried to put a rope around my neck."

"I wanted you to feel that way, Bob. But it wasn't my cut-in to say so. Down in her heart Manda don't like Army life any more than I took to it. Go after her,

partner. And good luck to you!"

They were grinning when they entered the cabin. Nora, dressed in the working clothes of a cowhand, eyed them with a puzzled smile.

"Don't tell me that you have a jug hid in the barn. What's the grinning about?"

"You got a new ramrod," announced Wade. "Bob's goin' to help you run the Shamrock outfit while Michael and I spend our time up in the Injun cave tinkerin' with that trick leg and nibbling at a bottle of shamrock dew, swapping yarns. The last of the Irish kings is dead. Long live the king! Strap your hoot-nanny leg on, Michael. Bundle up, Nora. We're movin' camp. I have a notion that Ranger Bob Hampton is goin' to play brand inspector when the next bunch of so-called Gunsight beef steers are delivered at Fort Bear Paw. Did I guess right, Bobert, old badge polisher?"

"Like you was raised and trained a mind reader, partner. Let's git goin' while there's snow fallin' to cover our sign."

At the barn Michael O'Banion made Bob put his saddle on the big sorrel gelding. "He's yours, lad. Though he's a miserable bit av horseflesh and an ingrate." Nora backed her father's words with a firm smile and nod.

It was only later that Bob learned for certain what he now suspected—that the last of the Irish kings was giving him the most promising three-year-old in the Shamrock iron.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Gunsight Cattle Steal

TWO hundred head of big native Montana four year old steers were being driven through the big gate at the Fort Bear Paw corrals. Thiebault, a tall, raw-boned, hawk-beaked man, rode on one point. Wolff, stocky and heavy-shouldered, rode on the other point. The slim, black-eyed, black-moutached Juan Elias rode behind with the drag men. Half a dozen Gunsight cowpunchers handled the cattle with the ease of top cowhands.

Counting the cattle through the gate, one on either side, Sheriff Al Hammond, a beefy, pockmarked man, and the trim, handsome, Captain Karnes sat their horses.

There were patches of snow on the frozen ground and there was a little warmth in the sun that showed noon high in a cloudless sapphire sky.

Major French and his daughter Amanda were with a group of riders who had just come back from a wolf hunt with a pack of hounds. A sergeant had taken the hound pack to the kennels for feeding. Major French, Manda and the others lingered at the corral to watch the cattle being counted in. The major looked tired and worried, his handsome face grayish and haggard. He had already emptied a pint of whiskey but showed no sign of being tipsy. From sunken, bloodshot eyes he watched the cattle that milled inside the corrals. The shaggy winter hair hid the brands. Some of the earmarks, cropped left ear and swallowfork right, looked suspiciously fresh.

"Don't worry, Dad," Manda's gloved hand rested on her father's arm as their stirrups touched. "Wade's out of the country by now. The sheriff's here at the corrals as usual. If there was any bad news, he'd be telling it, the whiskey-soaked glory hunter. If he or his hired killers hurt Wade, I'll kill that man. Look at him. The neck of a bottle sticking out of his pocket. And he represents the law! One Ranger like Bob Hampton would whip a corral full like him. I wish Bob was here. He'd side Wade, right or wrong."

"You seem to forget," snapped Major French, "that Bob Hampton murdered one brother of yours."

"I wonder. . . . Look! Riders com-

ing yonder. There are only two of them but they're riding like they were on business. If they're two of Al Hammond's hired killers—if they're coming to tell him that Wade's been killed . . . !"

"Quit it. You're acting like a child. One rides like the O'Banion girl. They're both riding Shamrock sorrels. Even at this distance I can tell that much. Come along to the house, Manda."

Major French was going to his quarters for a stiff drink. He needed one. There would be Shamrock steers in the corral. He didn't want to be on hand when Sheriff Al Hammond got rough with the girl. But Manda French shook her head.

"You trot along, dad. I want to see if she might have news of Wade. I know you don't want me hanging around the corrals when beef are delivered. But I'm staying, just the same, this time. You forget that I'm no child any more."

"Stay, then." Major French rode over to where Captain Karnes was comparing his tally with the sheriff's.

"Even two hundred head, Sheriff," he smiled faintly, his pale blue-gray eyes as chilly as new ice.

"All in the Gunsight mark, Cap'n. I'll sign clearance on 'em if you'll gimme your pencil."

"The O'Banion girl's coming with one of her men," Major French said to Captain Karnes in a low tone. "Get Manda away from here, quick. Let Hammond handle the O'Banion girl. He's paid for jobs like that. I'm going to my quarters."

But when Captain Karnes rode up he tapped Amanda lightly on the shoulder with his riding crop. "Mess call, Manda. A little appetizer and then chow. Beat you to the barn for a kiss."

Manda French shook her head. She had hardly heard his voice or understood what he was saying. She was staring, white lipped, at the tall, wide-shouldered cowpuncher who was riding towards the corral with Nora O'Banion. She'd watched for Bob Hampton's coming too many times to be mistaken.

CAPTAIN KARNES followed the direction of her fixed stare. But he did not know Bob Hampton's riding well enough to recognize him at that distance. He took Bob for a Shamrock cowpuncher, coming here with Nora O'Banion to make trouble. He wanted Manda out of the way before Sheriff Al Hammond ran Nora and the Shamrock cowpuncher off. Hammond's talk and his ways were apt to be rough. He didn't want Manda around.

The blonde moustached captain took Manda's bridle rein and started to lead her horse away. She turned her head with an angry toss, her dark eyes flashing.

"Quit that, you idiot!" she snapped. "Do you want me thrown?"

Captain Giles Karnes flushed darkly. "The Major wants you at the house. And I don't think I quite like the term 'idiot'."

"Then let my horse alone. I'm not going to the house."

"Here's your clearance paper, Cap!" bawled Al Hammond's foghorn voice. "This ain't the time ner place fer lollygaggin'. Let's git this job done. I got a wolf to skin back in the hills."

"If you were a Texan," said Manda, "you'd knock the ears down on that braying jackass."

Then Captain Karnes recognized Nora as one of the riders coming. Instinctively he smoothed his carefully trimmed blond moustache, but an uneasy look came into his light blue eyes. He hoped the herd would be clean of Shamrock cattle. If it wasn't, then there would be an ugly row.

"Why don't you get on to the house where you belong?" he snapped to Manda. "I'll handle Hammond." He swung his horse around and rode towards the corral

gate where Thiebault, Wolff and Elias sat their horses. Thiebault was saying something to the sheriff, nodding his head towards the two approaching riders. Then Captain Karnes recognized the man with Nora O'Banion and the color drained from his frost reddened cheeks.

Bob Hampton had unbuttoned his short buffalo coat, so that his Ranger badge caught the rays of the sun. He rode up with Nora alongside, his hand near his six-shooter, his eyes watching Thiebault, the most dangerous of the three Gunsight killers. His glance flicked the others, and rested on the red faced sheriff.

"You're the law?"

"You bet I am, mister. The only law that cuts the ice around here. That Texican star is tin up north here. What's in your craw?"

Captain Karnes rode up. Bob smiled thinly at the officer, and spoke without the formality of a greeting.

"Glad you showed up, Captain Karnes. There's a point I'm not quite clear on. If a man is arrested on an Army Reservation, who is entitled to make the arrest? And where is the prisoner jailed?"

"Only military police rate here, Hampton. You're not in Texas now."

"I know my geography enough to realize that. Call out the guard, Captain Karnes. I want Thiebault, Wolff and Elias put in the guard house. They shot Michael O'Banion day before yesterday. He lived to positively identify the three men who bushwhacked him—Thiebault, if you or either of those two snakes with you make a gun move, I'll fill your belly full of lead. Call the guard, Karnes, and Miss O'Banion will prefer charges. Those three men left Michael O'Banion for dead in the blizzard day before yesterday. You'll arrest 'em?"

A first lieutenant saluted Karnes. "I'm officer of the guard, sir."

As officer of the guard, he ranked all other officers at the Fort. Here was a chance to do a favor for Nora O'Banion who was the toast of the officers' mess. He blew his whistle. A sergeant and several troopers rode up at a trot.

"Put those three men under arrest."

"Look here, Karnes," snapped Thiebault, "are you goin' to stand for this?"

"The matter's not mine to handle, Thiebault. Charges have been preferred. The officer of the guard is in charge of all M.P. duties." Captain Karnes made a hopeless gesture with his hands.

"Damn you, Hammond, do somethin'!" snarled Thiebault as the sergeant and his troopers surrounded him and Wolff and Elias. "Don't let 'em get away with this, you big blunderin' ox. Take me an' the boys to your jail in town. Don't let that big Texican son git away with this!"

"I'll take charge of the prisoners," blustered Al Hammond. "They're civilians with civilian rights. I know my law."

"Not as Uncle Sam interprets it," said the young officer of the guard. Fall back, Sheriff. These are my prisoners. As you told the Ranger, your badge is tin on a military reserve. Sergeant, disarm the prisoners and put them in the guardhouse. Use force if they offer resistance."

"I'll get out." Captain Karnes told Thiebault in a low tone. I'm with you."

"You better be," said Thiebault. He looked hard at Bob Hampton. Bob grinned widely. "Long time no see you, Thiebault. Not since I run you and them other two blacklegs outa Texas. I hear you're doin' quite a thrivin' business up north. Take 'em away, Lieutenant. Keep 'em on ice."

AS the three Gunsight men were taken away under guard, Bob edged his horse alongside that of the sheriff who stared after the prisoners, a dark scowl knotting his forehead. Bob reached out and took the signed inspection blank from his thick hand. Al Hammond's hand came around with a jerk, dropped to his gun.

"Take it easy, Hammond. The soldier man says your badge is tin, like mine. And this no man's land would make as purty a duelin' ground as ever I sighted. Don't claw for that smokepole, mister, or I'll make you use it. Either fill your hand or keep 'em both on your saddle horn."

Al Hammond's hand came slowly away from his gun. He was no coward, and he was faster than the average man on the draw. But there was something about this big Texas Ranger that cowed him.

"Nora," said Bob, "if Captain Karnes will oblige by havin' a couple pair of horse clippers fetched from the stables, we'll run a few head of these fuzzy haired steers through the chute and clip around to see if we find ary Shamrocks under the winter coat. Sheriff Hammond has done signed this bill of inspection. If anything but Gunsight brands show up from the clippin', you kin hold him liable as well as the owners of the Gunsight brand."

"You're meddling in something that don't concern you, Hampton!" Captain Karnes' face was white under its weathered tan. "You can't touch those cattle without proper papers."

Bob didn't answer. He was looking past Karnes, staring at a girl in dark green riding habit, riding side-saddle on a big black hunter. She was one of a group of a dozen officers and women who had been watching from a short distance.

Bob's heart pounded the blood into his throat with trip-hammer pulse. Manda French had never looked more beautiful than she looked right now, her jet black hair a little tumbled around her face as it had blown there in the wild chase after the wolf hounds. Bob held his breath, waiting for her to wave, to call out, to ride towards him.

But Amanda French did none of those things. She deliberately turned to the group. Her voice carried plainly to Bob's ears.

"You were saying last night," she said, her red lips smiling, "about the tameness of the Wild West. Well, how was that for melodrama? You can believe this or not but the hero with the beautiful heroine had five notches on his gun before he was sixteen years old. He's a Texas killer! Last one to the barn unsaddles the horses. Winner gets an extra drink!" Manda spurred her horse to a run. The others followed.

Bob felt a little sick inside. He wanted to ride away from here, to get away from everything and everybody. Manda French was as treacherous as bushwhackers like Thiebault. She'd just taken a saw-edged, rusty knife and run it into his heart. He felt the dizzy, sickening shock of its ugly dull pain that would stay there.

"Head and tail up," said Nora in a low voice. "No woman on earth is worth it, Bob. Bonehead, can't you see she was green with jealousy? The man of her dreams shows up after the long, achin' years, the champion of a red-headed hussy that rides a man's saddle and wears man's britches. To those Army women, I'm an unmoral wench. Open the corral gate, partner. I can cut my Shamrock stuff by the fresh scabs on their ears. Don't lose that inspection slip. Here, you had better give it to me."

Nora O'Banion's hand closed over his. Gripped it tightly. Bob realized suddenly that he was not the only one hurt by Manda French's words that had ridiculed the girl Nora. Her hand trembled inside the heavy buckskin gauntlets. Bob gripped it hard and grinned, looking into her deep blue eyes that were bright with angry, unshed tears.

"Nobody can do that to us, Nora," he told her in a low tone, "and make us like it. Remember this. You're the daughter of the last of the Irish Kings!" He let go her hand and leaned from his saddle to pull the long wooden gate pin.

"Ride in, cowhand," he said, a grim

smile on his mouth, "we'll pick us a few Shamrocks. Karnes, get those clippers. Don't run off, Hammond. You're one of the star pupils at this brand-readin' lesson. And unless I'm a long ways wrong, you kin do with just such learnin' as you'll get out of it."

BOB swung the gate closed behind him. He and Nora rode through the steers. Nora pointed to half a dozen of the big four year old beef steers whose ears showed unmistakable sign of having been marked recently with a knife.

"Ours. Ours. Ours," she identified the steers. "That brockle faced steer is a Gillis critter. Yonder's another Gillis steer. Dead men's cattle, Bob."

They shoved about fifty head into the smaller corral that had wings leading to the branding chute that led to an empty corral. Closing the gate, Bob and Nora crowded the chute full and closed the chute gate. They then rode over to where Captain Karnes, his face white, sat his horse.

"As purchasin' officer," drawled Bob, rolling a cigarette, his weight in one stirrup, "I reckon you're held responsible for what you buy. I'm holdin' Sheriff Hammond's inspection release which he signed. The next move, Captain Karnes, is up to you. I'm representin' the Shamrock outfit. And I'm kinda curious to see just what you're goin' to do about it. I sighted the sheriff headed for the skyline at a long lope like he had important business a long ways off. It's your move, Captain Karnes."

Captain Giles Karnes, ignoring Bob, spoke directly to Nora, saluting, smiling thinly.

"If the Gunsight cowpunchers have made any mistakes, Nora, I can assure you that those mistakes will be rectified. Naturally, the army is not purchasing cattle not in the correct brand. If Hammond has been negligent or careless, he'll be held responsible in due time. If the Gunsight cowboys have made mistakes, due to the heavy winter coats of the animals obscuring the brands, then that is a matter for the civil law courts. You realize that the inspection paper you're holding relieves me, as purchasing officer, of any blame in the matter. The man signing the inspection slip is solely responsible. I've sent for horse clippers. Hammond and the Gunsight cowboys pulled out. The sheriff, as you probably know, has a posse out and he had to get back to them. I'll get soldiers to help you handle

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the cattle." Captain Karnes was regaining his self-confidence as he talked. The bugle sounded mess call. He smiled and saluted the girl almost gaily

"You'll do me the honor, Nora, to have chow with me? Your ramrod can mess with the men. The sergeant here will take care of you, Hampton."

"Judy O'Grady and the Colonel's lady," smiled Nora, "don't eat at the same table."

"Nonsense, Nora. Manda's jealous of any girl that ranks her around the Post. She's got her claws out this morning. We don't eat at a long table, you know. I have my own quarters and my own cook. You and I'd eat there."

"I've always had a hankerin'," said Bob, in his lazy Texan drawl, "to take you by your ears, mister, and twist—"

"Some other time, Bob," said Nora, and her spur rowel raked his boot. She smiled impishly at the army man.

"I'm going to take you up on that, Captain. I'm hungry. Bob, our horses could stand a bait of grain. You won't mind eatin' with the enlisted men, at the non-com's mess?" She gave him a swift, sidelong look and winked.

"You're the boss, Nora," said Bob a little savagely. Not that he minded eating with the enlisted men.

He read an eager welcome on the leathery face of the grizzled top sergeant whose nickname was Hardtack. He was one of Bob's boyhood heroes. A whisky-loving, two fisted, hard riding old trooper who had gotten Wade and Bob out of many a boyhood scrape.

Hardtack headed for the stables with Bob. A trooper took Captain Karnes' mount and Nora's horse.

"Thank God, Bob," said the old top sergeant, "you showed up. It was me that rode forty miles to another town to mail that letter Wade sent you. He didn't dast trust it to the Post mail or the mail in town. Where's the boy? Safe and sound? Them man-huntin' devils after him like the hound pack after that wolf this mornin'. The wolf got away and I took it as a good sign. You've seen Wade?"

"He's safe, Hardtack. What's the inside of this beef business?"

"Whatever it is, son, it stinks like a skunk nest. The Old Man's gettin' white headed with worry. He's sittin' in his quarters right now with a quart bottle and a gun on his desk. He must have seen the guard takin' them three Gunsight men to the hoosegow. I opened the door and he snapped my head off. His face was as gray as lead and he was writin' somethin'. You don't suppose, now, that—"

"Where's his house? Hell's bells, man! Hit a lope!"

CHAPTER FIVE

One Hour's Start

MAJOR FRENCH'S house was across the deserted parade ground. Bob and the top sergeant crossed it on a dead run. Bob was the first to quit his saddle. Without formality he flung open the front door and went into the hallway. He charged headlong at the closed door at the end, crashed it open and with the hurtling speed of a football tackler he dove at the white moustached Major French. He knocked the Army .45 aside, and the gun exploded with a roar, sending its heavy slug into the ceiling. Bob jerked the gun from the officer's hand as the top sergeant, panting hard, his leathery face putty color, burst into the room. He stared at the motionless form of Major French on the floor beside the overturned swivel chair.

"He's all right, Hardtack," said Bob. "Bumped his head when I knocked him out of his chair. Stand guard outside the door. Don't let anybody, even his daughter, come in. Tell 'em the best lie you can

cook up. Only keep 'em out of here."

"You sure he's all right, Bob?"

"He's comin' out of it now. Get out there, man! Shut the door as you go out!"

Bob picked the inert form of the major up in his arms and laid him on a horsehair sofa. He poured a drink from the half empty decanter on the desk and handed it to Major French when the latter sat up slowly, his bloodshot eyes blinking.

As Major French gulped down his drink, Bob Hampton took the scrawled message on the desk and deliberately twisted it and set a match to it. Dropping the gray, flaky ashes into the big silver ash tray that held a litter of cigar stubs.

"I talked to Wade last night, Major," Bob helped himself to a drink. "He's as fit as a quarter horse, safe as a preacher in church. I got proof that he didn't kill Bill Gillis and his son. Nora O'Banion will prove him an alibi that'll hold water in any court. He was with her the night the Gillis' men were bushwhacked. I think Sheriff Al Hammond is ready to call his dogs off. Thiebault, Wolff and Elias are locked in the guard house where—"

"Where they'll talk if I don't let 'em out. I'm ruined, man! Have you ever seen an army officer courtmartialed and stripped of his rank? They tear the epaulets from his shoulders. Cut the buttons with the United States coat of arms from his blouse."

Major French's harsh voice broke in a dry sob. He buried his handsome white head in his hands.

To Bob Hampton the breaking of this stiffbacked military man, this display of weakness of the man who had used whiskey to nerve himself to the point of suicide, was ugly and revolting. He made no attempt to mask his contempt as Major French finally lifted his head, his emotions somewhat under control. The officer poured himself a drink.

"This must be a sweet sort of revenge for you, Hampton," he said bitterly, reading Bob's eyes. "I branded you as a murderer once."

"I don't think you ever actually believed I shot your son Ray," said Bob, showing no mercy for the man. "Did you?"

"I wouldn't have let the law hang you, Hampton."

"But you would have let 'em put me in prison for a year or so. Long enough, anyhow, to get Manda away from me. Young Karnes came from a wealthy family. He was a West Pointer and that's your notion of a gentleman. I'd always been a bad influence, you figured, for Wade. You blamed me when Wade turned down a West Point appointment to take up cow-punchin'. And when you thought Manda was throwin' herself away on a two-bit cowhand Ranger, you didn't lose the chance to poison her mind a-plenty when the sign was right. When you got transferred here, you had Karnes transferred. You got him his captain's bars, had him on your personal staff as aide or somethin'. You'd gamble yourself into a bad hole. Karnes' old man lost his money in the stock market. When Thiebault showed you how to clean up on beef contracts, you took a long chance. Not trustin' Thiebault, you sent for your son Wade who was a top cowman. You wanted Wade to protect your interests. But when Wade began gettin' wise to Thiebault, that gentleman got on the prod. Thiebault pawed dirt in your face. Threatened to squeal on you if you didn't git rid of Wade. And mister, you sat back and let Thiebault frame your own son. You sold Wade French out for dirty money. As fine a boy as ever lived. If he's shot down by that pack of hired killers, you'll face God Almighty as the murderer of your own son!"

"That's not true! I told Wade to go back to Texas. Begged him to pull out. But he—"

"But Wade stayed, mister, because he believed that you were in a tight and gettin' the worst of it. He was riskin' his life to side you. He won't let himself believe that his father is a damned thief!"

MAJOR FRENCH, his face gray, eyes like those of a trapped animal at bay, half rose from his chair.

"Sit down," snapped Bob. "You're guilty as hell. But I didn't come here to get any kind of revenge. You didn't hurt me, mister. My friends never for any part of a second believed I shot young Ray French. If Manda chose to believe it, that was her nature, I reckon. I come here from Texas to side a man I love like I'd love my own brother, if I had one. I kept you from killin' yourself to save Wade French from knowin' that his father was a yellow coward as well as a damned thief. And I'm goin' to get you out of this dirty mess if it's possible to do so. Save you from disgrace. But don't try to thank me, ever, understand? And don't ever let Wade French know that his god has clay feet. If you want to use that gun on your desk, use it on Thiebault. Sit tight, mister, and say nothin'. I'll pull you out of the bog, but it'll be up to you to clean the mud off your brass buttons afterwards. Wade French don't ever need to learn the truth about the father he worships. That job is yours and I'll hold you to it. Is that plain?"

"I think I know what you're driving at, Hampton. I won't fail you."

Bob Hampton, looking at the man, almost felt sorry for him then. Major French seemed to have aged twenty years since Bob had last seen him.

"A bath and a bait of grub would do you good, sir," he said, the hardness gone from his voice. "You've got Manda to face. You've got the officers and men under your command. Booze won't help you. Don't worry about Thiebault and Wolff and Elias. I'll handle 'em. And they won't squeal. They're goin' where men don't holler any more."

Bob Hampton found the top sergeant on guard outside the door. Bob wondered if his voice had carried through the closed door. Not that it mattered much. Old Hardtack probably knew everything there was to know about Major French, anyhow.

"Nobody showed up," he told Bob as they went down the hall and outside. "Lucky break. The Old Man in better shape, Bob?"

"He won't try that trick again, anyhow. Hardtack, I hope you ain't hungry, because we won't have time for grub. Take me over to the guard house, then we'll put up our horses."

At the guard house, Hardtack got permission for Bob Hampton to see the prisoners. So with Hardtack standing just outside the cell door with the cell keys in his hand, Bob faced the three renegades. Ignoring Wolff and Elias, he addressed Thiebault.

"You shot Ray French down on the border, Thiebault. There's no real proof, but I've got bench warrants for you three snakes. My orders was to use my own judgment in servin' those warrants that read dead or alive. If I take you three gents back to Texas, you'll hang. I don't like hangin's. And I don't like to think of that long trip back with you three skunks. So I'm goin' to follow my captain's orders and use my own judgment. Elias, down in your Mexico country, there's a law—the *ley del fuego*—the law of fire. The Law of Escape. No?"

"Por Dios, Tejano, you mean you weel use that?"

"Captain Karnes is goin' to turn big rocks and little 'uns to spring you three snakes outa jail. He's tryin' to talk Nora O'Banion out of preferrin' murder charges against you. But she ain't turnin' loose the three bushwhackers that shot her father. Not her.

"You, Thiebault, will play your hole card, eh? You'll get Major French to spring you. But his game is up, along with yours, Thiebault. You kin squeal to hell-and-gone, and there won't be nobody to care a damn! I got the pack of you beef rustlers. Includin' Major French and Karnes. French can't spring you; neither can Karnes. Is that plain? You got one chance—one out, Thiebault."

"Name your game, Ranger."

"I fetched pen and ink and paper. You're makin' out a statement that will clear Major French and Captain Karnes of all blame in this beef contract steal. And clear Wade of the Gillis killings. Write what I say and the three of you sign it. And I'll give you three blacklegs your guns and the horses you rode here. I'll give you one hour's start, then I'll be comin' after you. Me and Wade French. We'll kill you where we cut your sign."

"How do we know you'll give us an hour?" Thiebault's voice was suspicious.

Bob Hampton slowly drew his six-shooter and cocked it. He grinned faintly and without taking his eyes from Thiebault, called to the hard-bitten top sergeant.

"Sergeant, if I shot these three snakes, you'd testify that they tried to overpower me and I killed 'em in self defense?"

"If I went to hell for it, Bob!"

"Don't!" called Wolff suddenly, his voice a croaking whisper. "He'd do it, Thiebault! Sign the paper!"

"Por Dois, sign!" pleaded Elias, his swarthy face beaded with cold sweat.

Bob let the hammer down on his gun as Thiebault nodded his white lipped willingness to sign the statement.

WHEN it was written, signed by the three Gunsight owners, and witnessed by the top sergeant, Bob pocketed the document and grinned at the three renegades.

"Call the officer of the guard, sergeant. Charges of murder are dropped against these three hombres. Thiebault, you three had better shoot straighter next time when you set a bushwhacker trap. You almost missed O'Banion altogether. He'll likely be sidin' me and Wade French when we overtake you sharpshooters."

"O'Banion ain't dead!" explained Thiebault. "That murder charge ag'in' us was a bluff. We was tricked into signin' this thing—"

"But there's no trick to these bench warrants, Thiebault. If Karnes hasn't already thought of it, you might let those cattle out of the corrals so they can get to water. The soldiers will be eatin' sow belly till there is a new beef contract signed—signed by Wade French this time. Wade falls heir to the Gunsight outfit. What's called by right of conquest. Same way we got this land away from the Injuns. So-long, snakes. When we cut your sign, we'll be a-shootin', Thiebault."

"Sergeant," said Bob, when the three prisoners had been released and had ridden away, "I mebbyso made a mistake by turnin' those three ornery sons loose. But if we'd handled 'em any other way, they'd have set up a holler that could be heard plumb to Washington. If they make a clean getaway, it'll be all in the game. I see Karnes has had the corrals emptied. That bunch of beef steers are off the Military Reservation. Any proof that they was stolen cattle inside the corral is gone. Karnes is in the clear. Let's hope, Hardtack, that he'll remember the lesson."

"You figured on him turnin' those steers out, Bob?"

"Do you think I want to see Manda French's soldier man behind the bars? Sarge, if you'll water and grain my horse, I'll leave this signed paper with the Major."

"I taught you how to use your dukes," said the tough old top sergeant, "when you

was a kid. Showed you all the tricks of the fight game. Me that was the middleweight champ of the Army. And one thing I kep' drillin' you at was this—when you got a guy groggy, keep swingin' till he kisses the canvas—" Hardtack spat a vicious stream of tobacco juice at a patch of snow.

"You got that lily-fingered, feisty-tempered, horse-abusin', rank-springin' tin soldier hangin' on the ropes, groggy and ready to toss in the sponge. And what do you do? You lay back and fan the air and let him get set to swing from his ankles. And he'll hit low, boy. He's a dirty fighter. He's fouled you once. He'll hit below the belt again. And I bragged that I taught you all there was to know about fightin'. You're givin' up as grand and game a little girl as ever covered her hurts with a laugh and done her cryin' alone in the dark on her pillow. Dammit, Bob, you're lettin' that desk soldier steal your girl. And you ain't even puttin' up a scrap for the best prize a man can win. Think she's deaf to the beef scandal that's talked over the tea cups whenever the wimmen of the post get together? Miss Manda's no fool. How much she knows or don't know, I can't say. For she's never let on by word or look or action that her heart's fair busted from worry and grief. She's game—game to the core. Do you think she loves that damned young peacock who tries to make love even to the good-lookin' young Assiniboine squaws? Bob Hampton, I'd bragged that you was the best fighter I ever handled. That you had the makin's of a champ. And you're doggin' the biggest fight of your life. You're throwin' the fight to a rat."

Bob's hand thumbed the sergeant's back with a force that made the tough old trooper grunt.

"There's a bottle of Michael O'Banion's shamrock dew in my saddle pocket. Thinkin' I might run into you, I fetched it. Take to it." Bob headed for Major French's brick house across the parade ground.

IT was Manda French who opened the door in response to Bob's rapping. At sight of him she gave a startled gasp. The blood seemed drained from her face and her eyelids were red from weeping. Before she could close the door in his face, Bob took her roughly in his arms.

For part of a minute Manda struggled fiercely. Then her arms went around his neck and her quivering mouth was against his. She was sobbing like a small child whose heart was broken.

It was some minutes later when Bob finally released her. He rubbed his cheek against hers. She was whispering brokenly in his ear.

"No matter what you've done, Bob, I love you. Take me away from here. Now. Don't let me stay. Bob, if you love me, don't let me go!"

"I'll be back," he told her. "I got a paper for the Major. You can read it before you give it to him. It's what you might call his reprieve. I'm going back to where I left Wade at the O'Banion ranch. He'll be with me when I come back. I'll pick you up Nora now."

"Nora? Bob, Wade's in love with her. And right now she's with Giles Karnes at his quarters. I saw them by accident. He was trying to make love to her."

"So I figured. It was Nora's way of provin' to you that your tin soldier wasn't any Galahad, mebby. If you saw 'em, Nora wanted you to. Nora is just about what Wade claimed—all the aces in the deck. You treat her right, little Injun, or I'll give you back to that tin soldier." Manda shuddered instinctively. Bob thrust the paper Thiebault and the other two renegades had signed into her hand, kissed her, and headed for Captain Karnes' quarters with long-legged strides.

Hardtack, watching from the barn,

chuckled as he poked the stable sergeant in the ribs and winked at a small group of old troopers.

"Karnes," he spat savagely at a snow patch, "the best boxer in the regiment. It'll be a sweet scrap. Follow me, boys, but one at a time and no parade, mind. I'll cover any Karnes money you got. Corporal, fetch the two Shamrock sorrels, saddled and ready, to the rear of Karnes' quarters. Bob and Miss Nora might want to leave sudden. For months and years I've waited for this. That horse-abusin' paper soldier!"

"Amen to that," muttered the stable sergeant. "A man that'd abuse a horse like Karnes would beat a woman. Hardtack, if he gets trimmed, I'm gettin' drunk to-night, if the Major busts me for it!"

"Then there'll be a top-kick busted with you, soldier," spat Hardtack. "Deploy men, and approach the rear, careless-like. Bob Hampton's got the sweetest left ever swung in or out of a championship ring."

CHAPTER SIX

Enemy's Showdown!

BOB HAMPTON pushed aside the buck private on duty at the front door and strode into Captain Karnes' house. He jerked open the dining room door and saw Nora, her coppery hair tumbled about her face, her flannel blouse torn at the collar, standing behind a chair, the carving knife in her hand. Karnes, his blouse unbuttoned, his blond hair disarrayed from its sleek part, his face red from anger and too much whiskey, stood at bay, panting like a spent runner, his eyes hot and ugly.

"West Point failed," panted Nora, "to make either a gentleman or an officer out of Giles Karnes. Perhaps, Bob, you can do something about it. He doesn't seem to understand I was just play-acting—putting on a show for Amanda French. He wants to rassle."

"Shed your blouse, Karnes," gritted Bob. "I'm not fightin' the uniform, only the snake that's disgraced it. Take it off or I'll skin you out of it."

Giles Karnes welcomed this chance to fight the man he hated more than any other human being. In expectation of just such a climax to their hatred for one another, he had trained with every boxing instructor he could find. He was rated the light heavyweight champion of the fort; had knocked out the hardest of the enlisted men who had put on the gloves with him. His teeth bared in a grin.

"Shed your gun, Texan, or will you be crippled without it? You horned into my affairs once too often. Hampton, I'm going to break your unwashed neck. I'll beat your brains out through your face. I wouldn't sell this chance at you for a million." He shoved the table clear.

"Glad you feel thataway, Karnes. I was scared you'd rabbit on me. Nora, you better step outside. This won't be purty."

"Hand me your gun-belt, Bob," she said firmly, her blue eyes alight. "The last of the Irish kings would disown me if I ran out on this. Look out, Bob! He's at you!"

Bob sidestepped Karnes' swift rush, jarred the army man with a short jolt to the face, and the fight was on. They were fairly matched in weight, reach and strength, both scienced boxers. And they were fighting to the finish.

As they circled and rushed, swung, jabbed, countered, feinted, blocked, and swung again, neither had eyes for anything that went on around them. Neither man dared relax his vigilance for a split second. They did not see the faces of Hardtack, the stable sergeant, and the select group of old time troopers looking in the windows. Nor did either man see Manda French when she joined Nora in

the doorway between the dining room and hall. The two men fought in the middle of the dining room, with the table and chairs pushed against the wall. And as they battered one another, giving and taking, fighting clean, it looked like an evenly matched fight.

"It's the fightin' heart that'll tell," Hardtack kept saying over and over as he followed each blow, ducking and feinting in excited pantomine.

Now a group of cavalry troopers, ranking non-commissioned officers at that, peering through a captain's windows in broad daylight, cannot go unobserved. An inquisitive M.P. who had been profanely sent about his business by the top sergeant, spread the news of something unusual going on at Captain Karnes' house where, an hour or so before, Nora O'Banion had gone to dinner with the dashing young cavalry officer. The officer of the guard, backed by the sergeant of the guard, appeared on the scene to break up the gathering outside the window. The officer of the guard peered in. He whistled soundlessly and turned to the sergeant, his eyes shining with wild excitement.

"Get over to the officers' barracks, double time. Tell 'em that there's the damnedest scrap they'll ever see here. That Ranger and Heaven's-Gift-to-the-Army-Girls are mussin' hell out of each other. And keep clear of the Major's quarters. If he or—"

Then the officer of the guard, peering more closely through the window, sighted Nora and Manda inside. His jaw dropped. A moment later he was standing behind them, craning his neck to see over their heads.

"Bob!" cried Manda excitedly. "Lick 'im, Bob!"

Nora turned her head. Manda was clutching her arm. Nora laughed shakily and put her arm around Manda's waist. They clung to one another tightly. Whatever their feelings had been, jealousy and whatever else mixed in, it was gone now —gone forever. And in its stead was kindled the warm fire of lasting sisterhood.

Behind them gathered the officers of the post and the others in the kitchen doorway opposite. And the two men fighting knew that they were no longer staging a private fight when the young officer of the guard called out excitedly.

"A month's pay on the Ranger! Sock him, Texan!"

"Call it!" bellowed another lieutenant who had been knocked out once in the ring by Karnes. "Watch his left, Karnes!"

Then Hardtack broke the dining room window with his fist.

"Watch for a low 'un, Bob! Cover your belly, son! He's yellow, Bob! He'll foul ye, sure as hell if you let 'im. The left, Bob! The left!"

BOTH men were tiring. It was give and take, with footwork slowed down to a shuffle. Slugging toe to toe, Bob dropped Karnes with a right swing. He stepped back. Hardtack had crawled through the broken window and started counting the fallen man out.

"One—Two—Three—"

Bob, his face battered and blood-smeared, pushed the old top sergeant back. "No count, Hardtack," he panted heavily. "This goes to the finish."

Karnes was back on his feet, a little groggy, circling warily. Bob grinned through the smear of blood.

"Keep out of it, Hardtack. Keep the crowd off. This goes to the finish, I said."

Both men were badly battered, their eyes discolored and swollen to slits. Blood smeared their faces and torn shirts. They had taken about the same amount of punishment. Both were badly winded, their legs weakening fast. Their punches lacked steam. Hardtack backed towards the door

where Nora and Manda were standing.

"It's the fightin' heart," he said hoarsely, talking to himself "that'll tell now. The fightin' heart!"

The grizzled top sergeant backed into the two girls, turned to say something, and found himself looking squarely into the eyes of Major French who stood behind Nora and Manda The other officers had made a lane for him to pass. They eyed their commanding officer curiously. They wondered what he'd do.

Captain Karnes was the Major's fair haired boy. And he was battling the big Texan who had halted delivery on a bunch of Gunsight cattle. The beef contract had for months been the main topic of post conversation. Half lies and half truths had been garbled and mixed at women's teas and at the stables and canteen. What would the Old Man do about it?

Major French gripped Manda's shoulder. His face was white, stern lined. "This is no place for you, Manda," he said, his voice none too steady.

"On the contrary," said Manda. "No one has more right here than I have. Don't stop it."

"The last of the Irish kings," breathed Nora, "would lose another leg to see this. Next to the Donnegal Fair, it's— Fight fair, you scut!"

For Karnes had swung a low, hard blow to Bob's groin. Bob dropped to one knee. Karnes stood over him, waiting for him to rise, not stepping back, as Bob had stepped back in fairness to a man down, but ready to swing before Bob could get back on his two legs.

"Back, you damned rat," snapped Hardtack, starting forward.

"Keep out of it," gritted Bob. He was sick and dizzy with nausea. Crouched on one knee, he dove at Karnes' legs, upsetting him heavily. Then Bob was on his feet, crouching and shuffling slowly backwards.

"Get up, Karnes," he panted, his voice a harsh croak. "Stand up and fight!"

Captain Karnes was on his feet. He was not hurt as Bob Hampton was, but he was licked. Licked because his nerve had ebbed as the fight progressed. When he found that he could not whip Bob as he'd whipped other men in the ring, according to Marquis of Queensberry rules, he had tried fouling. And had failed. Now the last of his grit was gone; panic and red rage took its place.

He rushed Bob wildly, hoping to foul him again, but Bob met the rush with two flailing fists. Karnes went down. Bob stepped back, wiping the blood from his battered mouth.

"Get up, Karnes," he gritted, stepping back. "Stand up and fight! Or let the army call you a yellow-bellied cur!"

But all the fight was gone from the heart of Captain Giles Karnes. He lay on his dining room floor, head and face buried in his arms, sobbing.

"He won't git up," said Hardtack. "He's doggin' it, Bob. You've licked the heart out of him."

Major French turned away. He passed through the lane his officers made for him. Hardtack took Bob's arm and headed for the back door.

"Gangway, men," he shouted. "Gangway for a champ!"

"I got to git to the Shamrock ranch," panted Bob.

"Your horse is ready, saddled an' waitin'. Here's Miss Nora."

Manda was with Nora. Both girls were almost hysterical with wild excitement.

"I'm going with you, Bob," cried Manda.

"Stay with the Major," said Bob. "He needs you bad. I'll be back. Got a job to do—me and Wade, honey."

Bob took his gun-belt from Nora and buckled it on. Manda dabbed at his smashed, bleeding face with her handkerchief, cleaned away the blood, then threw

her arms around him and kissed him.

"Good little Injun," Bob grinned, and swung into the saddle. He and Nora headed for the Shamrock ranch at a long lope.

"The three Gunsight renegades," he told Nora, "are headed for the badlands. I'm pickin' up Wade and takin' their trail. It's what the Mexicans call *ley del fuego.*"

"Don't you Texas Rangers ever call it a day?"

"Not when there's snakes left to skin," was Bob's grim reply.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Blood Buys a Range

AT the Shamrock ranch, Sing Fat, the slant-eyed, wrinkled old cook, met them with a cackling grin. He pointed to an empty stall. Bob and Nora saw the dead body of Sheriff Al Hammond, a gun in his lifeless hand.

"He makee tly steal hoss," explained Sing Fat. "I ketchum. Now you ketchum washee, Mista Bob. Me savvy fixum black eyes. You betcha."

The sun was still two hours high above the western horizon. Bob let the Chinaman do a highly skilled job of setting his smashed nose and applying herb bandages to his swollen, battered eyes. Sing Fat's remedies worked with a miraculous speed.

His nose taped and his face still bandaged, he and Nora climbed a bare knoll back of the ranch house. Bob carried an old saddle blanket. Nora watched him kindle a fire and when the blaze was going, he piled sagebrush on it. The flame became a column of smoke in the windless air. Then Bob checked the smoke by smothering it with the blanket. Manipulating the blanket, he sent puffs of smoke skyward.

"The Injun smoke signals Wade and I used as kids," he told Nora. "He'll be watchin' with his glasses from up yonder at the cave. I just signaled him to come on down. Likewise that there was danger. And to come quick." Bob smothered out the fire with the blanket.

As Bob and Nora watched, they saw a column of smoke rise from the place on the mountainside where the hidden cave was. Wade was signaling that he was coming.

Nora gave a glad cry of relief. "He's safe, Bob! He and dad are safe!"

Nora was jumping up and down excitedly. Then she gave a sharp cry and would have fallen if Bob hadn't grabbed her.

"It's my ankle," she said, her face twisting in a grimace. "I sprained it. Ouch. If I wasn't a lady, I'd cuss. It hurts."

She couldn't bear her weight on it. After several attempts, while Bob supported her, his arm around her waist, hers around his neck, she gave it up.

"I'll pack you down," said Bob, and picked her up in his arms.

The sharp pain in her ankle made the girl faint. She smiled weakly. "Next time I do an Injun war dance, I'll wear moccasins instead of high heeled boots! I feel silly."

Bob chuckled and carried her down the knoll.

That was what Wade French saw through his powerful army field glasses. He had no way of knowing about the twisted ankle; he only saw his partner, the man who claimed to be the best friend he had in the world, take Nora, the girl Wade French loved, in his arms. Wade saw Bob Hampton holding her in his arms for several minutes. Then watched Bob carry her down the hill to the house.

The bright lights went out of Wade's eyes. He felt sick, shaking inside. His best friend had proved himself the lowest kind of a traitor, and in that moment of jealous anger a horrible doubt was

suddenly born in Wade French's mind. For Wade French figured that a man who would do what Bob Hampton had just done, was not above shooting Wade's brother Ray.

Michael O'Banion was tightening the straps on his peg leg. He saw the strange, tense look on Wade's face.

"Ye look sick, lad. What's wrong?"

Wade shoved the field glasses into their leather case with a savage jerk. "Time we got going," he said stiffly. He took Michael O'Banion's proffered bottle and held the neck of it to his mouth, gulping the raw pot-stilled Irish whiskey.

Michael O'Banion gasped. It was the first time he had ever seen Wade French take more than a polite sip of whiskey. He drained the last of it and threw the bottle down the slope. Even as the tinkle of shattered glass sounded, the crack of a rifle echoed through the rocks and a bullet snarled past Wade's head.

Wade and O'Banion were at a spot a hundred yards away from the narrow entrance to the rimrock cave that was hidden by brush. The shot had come from a place between them and the cave. There was no turning back. Their only course lay down the timbered, rocky slope, to the safety of the ranch below.

"It's the two of 'em!" roared the strident voice of Thiebault. "Young French and that one-legged Shamrock O'Banion. We ain't missin' no more. Hi, Wolff! Elias! This way! Fetch the men! Git around these two snakes. We're sellin' out high to Hampton."

Wade and O'Banion forted up in a nest of boulders, with Wade helping up the older man. Bullets spattered against the big granite rocks. Michael O'Banion's wild, savage Irish war-cry echoed back in the rough hills.

"Wade, lad, we'll give them Gunsight divils the fight av their misspent lives!"

AT the ranch Bob heard the distant gunfire. He sat Nora down near the barn door. He had a fresh horse already saddled, his belt loops filled, and an extra box of .30-.30 cartridges for his carbine.

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"Looks like I won't have to hunt far for Thiebault's sign. You kin knit socks or bake pie for Wade's supper. Don't leave the ranch. If any of the Shamrock cowhands show up, send 'em to help us. So-long."

Bob rode as far as he safely could. Then took his carbine and went on afoot, working his way up the rough slope towards the sound of guns. He had gone perhaps a hundred yards when he was almost ridden down by a man on a bay horse. It was Juan Elias and he was alone. They sighted each other at almost the same instant. The Mexican, deserting his companions, gave a sharp cry of dismay. His gun spat flame. but his horse was moving fast and spoiled his aim. Bob's first bullet knocked Elias from the saddle. Elias landed heavily, and rolled to an abrupt halt against a pine tree. As the man began shooting again, Bob aimed and fired. Elias slumped in a lifeless heap.

Bob shoved two fresh cartridges in the magazine of his shortbarreled carbine. He reached a clump of brush and crouched there. He spotted the location of five men by the powdersmoke from their guns. And as he located the boulder nest that sheltered Wade and Michael O'Banion, he could hear the last of the Irish kings cussing lustily.

Bob heard brush cracking below. Someone was coming up the slope. It might be one of the Shamrock cowpunchers. Or on the other hand, it might be one of the Gunsight tough hands. Bob waited, his gun ready.

Then Bob gave a start of surprise, for the man was Major French. The Major was wearing an old buckskin hunting shirt tucked in the waistband of shabby old riding breeches. He carried a hunting rifle besides his service Colts revolver. Bob hailed him cautiously. Major French signaled him and came up.

"Wade's up in those rocks? Manda read your smoke signals and I came to side you and him. He's up yonder?"

"He and O'Banion," said Bob.

"Thiebault?" snapped the Major.

Bob pointed to a clumb of rocks beyond. "Thiebault's behind that patch of boulders."

"Thiebault's the man who shot Ray," the Major said. "I got the truth out of Karnes. Karnes perjured himself at your trial. I suspected it, but never could get the truth out of him. You did a thorough job on Giles Karnes. He cashiered himself out of the army. I'm going after Thiebault now.

"I can't ask you to forgive the wrong I did you. I never wholly believed you shot Ray. Your accusations were based on fact—I wanted Manda to marry Karnes. His father was my friend, and he seemed to have all to offer a girl like Manda—wealth and a social position in the army. I was blind and couldn't see into the girl's heart enough to understand she loved you, and that was all that mattered. You cleared my name today and you cleared Karnes.

"Bob Hampton, I'm in your debt far more than I was in debt to the father of Giles Karnes, who had covered my gambling debts, then started clamping down on me for the money when he made a losing in the stock market. He threatened to take the matter to Washington unless I paid him. He was making me advance his son in the Army; forcing me to work with Giles in the handling of those beef contracts. That's the rotten story. I told Manda, and I want Wade to know. I want you and Manda to break it as gently as you can, if anything should happen to me. You're a white man, Bob Hampton. I want to wish you and Manda all the happiness I've been robbing you of. Would you mind?"

Major French held out his hand. He was smiling faintly, his eyes pleading tragically. Bob gripped the man's hand.

"There's no need for anything to happen to you, Major," said Bob. "Manda and Wade just about worship you. We kin work Wolff and Thiebault and the three men with 'em. Pick 'em off as we make the circle. It's Injun fightin', sir, and right in your line."

"You go one way around 'em," said Major French. "I'll take the shortest route to Thiebault. Good luck, Bob."

"Good luck, sir."

Their eyes met. A message of understanding passed between them. Their hands gripped, let go. Major French was smiling recklessly. Again he was the fearless, reckless cavalry officer who had been the hero of the Indian campaigns.

Bob Hampton let him go. Saw him work his way with the silent, swift skill of an experienced hunter, through rocks and brush. And then Bob Hampton saw Major French do the thing that forever wiped out any stain that might have tainted the fine record of a brave soldier. He stood erect, a plain target for his hidden enemies, and barked his challenge to Thiebault, the man who had killed his son Ray.

"I'm paying you off, Thiebault. Paying Ray's debt."

Bob couldn't see Thiebault. He only saw the buckskin-shirted Major French who had dropped his rifle and had his army six-shooter in his hand. Then there were flashes and smoke puffs from Thiebault's gun. Major French stood erect, a smile on his handsome face. His six-shooter and Thiebault's gun went suddenly forever silent.

Major French still was on his feet, his smoking gun in his hand. Then his knees bent and he slumped slowly to the ground.

Bob quit his shelter. A Gunsight man sighted him, shot at him and the slug ripped Bob's shoulder. He shot twice at the man, dropping him.

WADE FRENCH, at sight of his father, had been too stunned to act. It all happened in split seconds. When Major French fell, Wade threw caution to the winds. Perhaps the quantity of the Irish whiskey he'd swallowed made him too foolhardy. Throwing off O'Banion's clutch on his arm, he quit the rock shelter, shooting wildly at the brush patch that hid Wolff.

Bob saw Wade standing crouched, frantically thumbing the hammer of his six-shooter that was empty. With an empty gun in his hand, Wade was out in the open, too befuddled by whiskey or excitement even to run for shelter.

Bob heard Wolff's snarling laugh from a brush patch beyond. Bob acted with split-second speed. Quitting his own shelter, he cut in between Wade and the brush patch and caught the bullet meant for Wade.

It struck his thigh, staggering him. He kept on at a stumbling, headlong gait. He knew that he had one or two cartridges left in his six-shooter. No more than that. He'd dropped his carbine back yonder. He had to make his first shot count. Or he'd be as helpless as Wade.

Wolff saw Bob bearing down on him, only ten feet away. He shot but his aim was wild. Bob Hampton was on top of him. Bob's gun roared and Wolff pitched headlong on his face.

Michael O'Banion's gun had not been idle. He, too, might have lost his head and charged into the open, but his peg leg slipped into a narrow crevice between two big rocks and wedged there, anchoring him. Cussing his luck, he lay prone behind the rocks. Then he sighted a man moving behind a bush. His gun roared and the man leaped crazily, howling with pain. Another man sheltered behind the same bush let out a growling stream of profanity. Michael O'Banion rested the barrel of his carbine across a rock and as fast as he could handle the lever and

finger the trigger, sent a stream of bullets into the brush patch, raking it with a deadly staccato fire. Until all movement behind the brush ceased.

And as the echoes of his gun died, Michael O'Banion heard Wade French call out to Bob Hampton as Bob sat on a low boulder, reloading his empty six-shooter, a grin on his battered, bandaged face.

"I can't kill a man that's saved my life," Wade French was saying. "I can't fight a man that's been what you've been to me. And if I was a damned story book hero, I'd wish you and Nora happiness. But I'm no hero. And I'm tellin' you now that no matter what we've been to each other, how I hero worshipped you because you were my ideal, it's all wiped off the slate. I never thought I'd hate you. But I do. I saw you when you took Nora in your arms and when you made that smoke signal. I saw you even pick her up and carry her down the hill. You, the boy that I'd—"

Bob Hampton had been staring at Wade as he might at a man gone suddenly and starkly insane. Then, despite the racking pain of his bullet wounds, Bob roared with laughter. It wasn't exactly a sane laugh, for Bob's nerves had been rubbed raw. There was an undertone of hysteria to it.

"Shoot me where I sit, partner," Bob cried out, "but I can't help it. Oh, you bonehead! Hi, Michael O'Banion, come out from behind the rocks! The fight's over. All but Wade, who has run out of enemies and is about to shoot me full of holes, because Nora twisted an ankle dancin' a war jig when his smoke told her he was safe! And I had to pack her down hill. Call off the young terrier—don't let him kill off his sister's best feller."

"Will the two av yez quit that damned nonsense," wailed the last of the Irish kings, "and lend me a hand with me timber leg? Faith, Wade, 'tis the furst time that ever I saw the dew av the shamrocks have an ugly kick like that."

Wade was still standing there on wide-spread, weaving legs, like a drunken man. Then he collapsed and lay half on his back. His eyes were closed and his face bone white. There was a slowly spreading crimson stain on the front of his flannel shirt, a trickle of blood from the corner of his twisted mouth. Not until then did Bob or Michael O'Banion guess that a bullet from one of the Gunsight guns had struck Wade in the back.

"And the finest partner in the world," said Bob, lurching his way to where Wade lay, "died thinkin' I'd busted faith!"

MICHAEL O'BANION cut the straps of his wooden leg and hopped over on one leg. Dry sobs shook Bob's wide shoulders. The last of the Irish kings pushed him gently aside and with the blade of his jacknife cut away Wade's heavy flannel shirt and his undershirt. His fingers probed the ugly wound where the bullet had torn through the flesh under Wade's arm. He felt Wade's wrist for the pulse; felt again of the wound.

"The slug went in from behind, ripped the back shoulder muscle, tore through under the arm, and came out without so much as nickin' a bone. 'Tis nothin' that a bit av tight bandagin' won't fix. Faith, man, 'tis yourself that'll be kickin' the bucket if the blood keeps pourin' from yer laig there and yer shoulder. Wade's got a pulse stronger than the beat av a hammer. Lay back, now, the both av yez, and Doc O'Banion will patch ye both up. Rest aisy a minute. There's cloth for bandages up at the cave, and a bottle av shamrock dew. For 'tis Michael O'Banion, last av the Irish kings, that had a bit av medical experience mendin' cracked heads after the Donnegal Fair. Rest aisy, lads. Ye're foine byes, the pair av yez."

Michael O'Banion's hands moved with a surgeon's skill as he stanched the flowing blood, twisting tourniquets into place. Wade regained his senses quickly, grinning wrily at Bob and O'Banion.

"I played the fool, Bob. It runs in the family, eh? My father and sister accusin' you of killin' Ray. I make a—"

"I could knock him on the head, Michael," grinned Bob, "to shut him up. But I hate to spoil his looks. Speakin' of looks, partner, I've plumb ruined Giles Karnes, I reckon, for parlor work. Manda's back in the Injun tribe for keeps. And Nora savvies the smoke signals, so I reckon we got to make her a squaw. There's four of us in the tribe now."

Michael O'Banion muttered something about the both of 'em being loco and wrenching his peg leg from the rocks, he fastened it on and hobbled up to the cave for bandages and a bottle of dew.

"The Major—?" Wade's voice was low.

"—died like a soldier, Wade, with his service record as clean as a hound's tooth. He and I shook hands just before he tackled Thiebault. I'll tell you all about it some day. How Karnes and his father blackmailed the Major, how Manda stuck by him, how we cleaned the Major's slate. Major French will get a military funeral with full honors, partner."

"Thanks to a big Texican named Bob Hampton. I don't know the right words to tell you—"

"I'm turnin' in my Ranger badge," Bob broke in. "Stayin' here to buy in with you on this Gunsight outfit. We'll make a deal with the last of the Irish kings to pool the Gunsight and Shamrock spreads. Raise horses on the Shamrock range, graze cattle on the Gunsight. That just about makes all our kid dreams come true, partner. We've fought back to back and spilled blood together. We're goin' to be partners in the cow business. Manda is back in the tribe. Remember, she was always worryin' because you didn't have a squaw. Well, that's settled. And this ain't my notion, but Nora thought it might be a grand idea to pull off a double weddin' some day before long."

"You mean Nora said—?"

"Yeah. You kin ask her about it. And speakin' of angels appearin', look yonder. My pore eyesight tells me that yonder's Nora and Manda a-comin' up the hill. With Hardtack and a picked bunch of the fightin'est non-coms in the U. S. Cavalry. And listen to the last of the Irish kings yellin' and chargin' this way with a few drops of shamrock dew. The sun is settin' in the notch of Gunsight Pass. Partner, I shore like our new range. It's cow-country, man, cow country! And it's ours. Rear up and we'll give 'em a good ol-Injun war whoop."

And, as the wild war whoop echoed in the rough hills, the sun dropped behind the notch of Gunsight Pass.

THE END

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Broken Boss of Midnight Range

By Buck Gilmore

Jim bent down over the wounded man . . . Maybe he could be made to talk. . . .

They stole Jim Logan's last head of cattle, all his money, the girl he loved—and then left him blind. . . . Better that they'd killed him! For a man who can't see, but yet who can use his gun, may sometimes make a ghastly, deadly mistake!

IT WAS early morning when Jim Logan rode into Hachita and made his way down toward the Hachita City Bank. In his jeans he had fifteen thousand dollars in big bills, ready to deposit in the bank, now that it was open. That fifteen thousand was the proceeds from the sale of almost all of his cattle. It had

been a good sale, a money making proposition. Jim Logan hadn't been anxious to sell so many of his cattle that he would be crippled in getting another calf crop, but he could hardly refuse a deal like the one he had made.

The cattle buyer had come up from the south, saying he was buying for the revolutionists in Mexico. He'd wanted all the beef he could get. There was a profit in it. Jim Logan could replace his breeders and still have a profit. So why not? His range was nearly clean, but he could pay off the note at the bank and then re-stock his ranch. After today Jim would be sitting pretty. He'd be financially secure. He'd be married day after tomorrow, after waiting three years till he'd built his ranch, till he was out of debt.

Those three years had been hard and grueling, filled with sacrifice and man-killing labor. They had left their mark on Jim Logan, made him leaner, gaunt, like a hard-run wolf. They had made his eyes, sunken back in his head, burn bright with the fire of determination. Building up a big, money-making spread from nothing had given his squared jaw an added out-thrust, given his shoulders a square, fighting set.

In those three years Jim Logan had not come to Hachita for one moment of relaxation.

"What's the use of working yourself to a ragged edge for a dollar?" Sid, Jim's adopted brother, had often asked him. "There'll be money when you're dead and gone."

There would be money when Jim Logan was dead and gone, but Barbara Brandon couldn't be expected to wait forever for a man to make something of himself. So Jim worked and Sid helped sometimes when he had to; and when he didn't have to, he nagged hell out of Jim for spending money. But he didn't get much. Jim denied himself, so he denied Sid. And Sid wouldn't stand for that. They finally had a break, and Jim put a mortgage on the ranch and bought out Sid's share. That was the mortgage Jim was going to pay off now.

Sid had bought a little place adjoining Jim's, with his money. Jim guessed that Sid was getting along all right or he'd have heard from him.

Logan dismounted at the bank. He went in and shoved the bundle of money through the iron grille to Langdon, the bank president, who was behind the cage. Langdon looked at the money, surprised. Then he smiled graciously.

"You've done a great job, Jim," he said. "You've put up a great fight to get ahead. You—you sell out, maybe?"

"I just sold some cattle," Jim Logan said. "I'll pay off my note and re-stock. From now on, I'll owe no man a dollar."

Langdon kept counting the money. Jim Logan kept thinking how swell it was to be getting ahead. He remembered the discouragements, the hard times, the days when he'd think he'd never make the grade. But he'd done it. He'd—

"Jim."

Jim Logan looked up at the banker. Langdon had one of those new bills up before him, comparing it with another, an older one. The banker was frowning.

"Who paid you this money?" he asked.

Jim Logan told him. The banker picked up a few more of the new notes. He shrugged, with a queer smile, as he put them down again.

"I'm sorry, Jim," he said. "They're counterfeit. A pretty good imitation, but they're as worthless as so much wrapping paper. I'm afraid, Jim, you've sold your cattle for nothing, unless you can catch the man who gave these to you."

A cold chill permeated Jim Logan. He raced to the door of the bank and leaped on his horse. He thundered out of town and started across the flats. Then it came to him, like a heavy weight on his mind, how futile it was to run, to race along

like a madman. The cattle delivery and the payment had been made on Saturday evening. The crook who had bought them knew that Jim could not get to a bank till Monday morning. That gave Saturday night, all day Sunday, and Sunday night for a forced drive—time enough to get the cattle into Mexico. They would be there now, a safe crossing insured by Jim Logan's perfectly legal bill of sale. . . .

Jim Logan stopped. With dull, lifeless eyes he looked out across the hills to where Barbara Brandon lived. Right now she'd be preparing for their marriage which was to take place tomorrow. He looked in the other direction, to where his own lands lay. They would belong to the bank now because he could not pay his obligation. He was broke, as poverty stricken as a tramp! And not a chance in the world to make a comeback!

JIM LOGAN rode on slowly then. The sun was no longer bright. The rolling, grass-carpeted hills were no longer things of promise. He had to pass close to where Sid had his ranch, and he circled a little so he could drop in on his brother. Maybe the kid was right. Maybe there was more to life than just making money. And anyway, it wasn't right for brothers to be as Jim and Sid were—even though they weren't blood relatives. Jim Logan would tell Sid that he hadn't meant to be harsh. Maybe the kid thought that Jim was making it hard on him just because Jim's father had taken Sid in and given him a name when Sid was a homeless, nameless waif. . . .

He dismounted at Sid's little place. He looked at the corral, and saw a couple of horses there. He didn't know what bronc Sid was riding these days, so he didn't know whether he was home or not. He called, but there was no answer.

He went into the house and looked around. Sid had a little place, but it was clean and well kept. Jim sat down to wait for Sid's return. His eyes went to a table in the center of the room on which there was a wallet. It was Sid's wallet. It looked sort of plump, like it was well filled, and he wondered if Sid was in the habit of leaving money lying around for some passing puncher to steal. He went over and opened the wallet and looked in amazement at the money that bulged it. It was filled with new bank notes, all twenties, and Jim felt chilled as he knew that his were exactly the same. The counterfeit bills he had taken to the bank. Maybe Sid had been cheated!

Jim waited a while longer, then went out and rode across the range. As he came to his own land, he saw a rider off across the hills. It was Sid, and he hurried to meet him. That old frozen look came to Sid's face when Jim rode up. It was that old stubborn, sulky set that made Jim Logan want to take him out of the saddle and spank him. But that look took a lot of enthusiasm out of Jim. He nodded and spoke to Sid.

"You getting along all right, Sid?" he asked, a little stiffly.

"I'm getting along swell," said Sid.

"Sold any cattle lately?" asked Jim.

Sid shook his head. "No, I haven't sold any cattle lately. I don't have very many to sell. Why?"

Jim was going to say why, then all of a sudden it struck him that it was funny as hell for Sid to have that counterfeit money, when he hadn't sold any cattle. If he hadn't received that money from the bogus cattle buyer, then how did it come to be in his possession?

"I just wondered." Jim shrugged. "I heard there was a cattle buyer in town. I wondered if he bought anything from you."

"No," Sid said. "I didn't know there was a cattle buyer here."

Jim turned his bronc and rode on. When he looked back, Sid was going toward home. Jim went on, with that

ugly question still persisting in his mind. If Sid hadn't sold any cattle, where in the hell did he get the bogus bills? There had to be an answer to that, but Jim didn't like to think of the answer that kept crowding up into his brain: that Sid Logan was in with that crooked son who had cheated him out of fifteen thousand dollars. Either Sid had lied, and had sold some cattle, or he was about the dirtiest crook who ever took an underhand crack at anybody.

Off across the hills, Jim stopped at the top of a brushy rise and looked down at a solitary rider driving a small bunch of cattle ahead of him. The cattle were Jim's, just about all he had left. The rider was a gent whom he had seen once in town; a fellow who had been playing poker with Sid.

A swift rush of rage rose up within Jim Logan as he sat there and watched that rustler stealing his last few cattle. It wasn't that those few head would do him any good now. He might just as well lose them. Those measly few would not help at all. But a murderous fire glowed in Jim's sunken eyes.

He took his gun from his holster, pushed his horse through the brush and started down the slope at a reckless gallop. He grinned as he saw the rustler start, turn and try to raise a gun. But Jim's gun bellowed first. He saw the rustler weave in the saddle, saw him fall.

Jim rode down and stood over him, saw that the man was still alive. He bent over the wounded man. If he wasn't dead, maybe he could be made to talk. Maybe he'd tell just who this fake cattle buyer really was. Maybe this gent knew.

Then something sharp stung Jim in the back. A heavy hand pushed him forward as a rifle report rocked the air. He stumbled, turned and raised his gun. A flash of flame leaped out from behind a bush. Many brilliant lights exploded in front of his eyes. He sank limply down into a wave of darkness that rose up from the ground to meet him.

JIM LOGAN groaned. He was stiff and weak and sore. His face was down on the ground. He felt the hard ridges of the packed sand cutting into his face, and moved his head to ease the pain. He put his hands under him and pushed himself up. He opened his eyes, but he could not see. It was pitch dark. He blinked. He tried to get some light in his eyes, to put something in outline against the sky so he could orient himself. But he couldn't even see the sky.

He sat there for a while, and gained strength. He remembered the man who had been stealing the last of his cattle, wondered if the fellow had died. He remembered being shot. The bullet had grazed his shoulder, knocking him off balance. Then he had turned, and that other shot had got him. Likely the rustler's partner had fired that. But who could the rustler's partner be? Sid was the only man Jim had ever seen associating with the fellow who had been driving the cattle. And Sid wouldn't shoot Jim. Even if Sid was low-down enough to work a crooked game with bogus money, he wouldn't shoot his brother. Or would he? Now, with bitterness heavy upon him, almost anything seemed possible.

He rose to his feet. Funny, he thought, how dark it was. It had never been so damn dark before. When he turned, he felt the stiffness of the wound from the bullet that had struck him in the back. He felt a dull, throbbing ache in his head. He took an uncertain step and stopped. A sudden chill, as cold as ice, raced up his spine. A feeling of total helplessness made him weaker, made his heart race in his breast. Then he turned, and the warmth of the sun struck his face. He stooped and felt of the ground. It was hot. The sun was still shining. It wasn't

night. It was daytime. Daytime, and he couldn't see! He was blind!

For perhaps a minute he stood there, stiff and straight, digesting this new and horrible thing that had come to him. He was blind—so blind he could not see the sun when he faced it. First the stolen cattle. . . . Then the money in Sid's wallet. . . . Then this. . . .

Gradually an envenomed smile came to Jim Logan's lips. As if any one of those things had not been enough to whip a man! Going broke, and losing Barbara was enough. That ugly suspicion about Sid was enough. And now blindness! Jim Logan took a step forward. He stumbled, and that bitter twist to his lips grew more pronounced.

He went on. He fell. He rose and stumbled forward again. He kept that warmth from the sun on the left side of his face. With it that way, he would be going north. He bumped into a rock, and the impact threw him back, knocked him flat. He lay there for a while, a tiny trickle of blood running down his face where the rocks had cut him. Blind! What a hell of a thing that was!

Those lines of acrid hurt about Jim Logan's mouth were etched there now. He rose and went on again. He stumbled often. He fell often. But each time he rose and went on, with his lips twisted in that cold smile of ironic bitterness. He felt the warmth of the sun fade. He knew that real darkness was coming. But that made no difference now. Everything was dark. Everything would always be dark, just like this, as long as he lived. . . .

He walked on, his head up, his shoulders back, his lips twisted like twin, down-curving things of wretched hatefulness on his pallid face. He fell and started to crawl, to keep from falling again, then cursed and rose to walk again. To hell with crawling! To hell with everything and everybody! These things that had happened to him were not accidents. Somebody had robbed him deliberately. Somebody had shot him. A man had blinded him by that shot that grazed his head. A human had done that. A human had done all those things. Maybe even Sid had had a hand in some of it!

The rattle of hoofs came to his ears, and Jim Logan stopped. He heard a yell, and stood still while several riders came up to him. He recognized them by their voices—Curley Wells and Sam Watkins and Bill Peters and Pete Mattern. Wells, Watkins and Peters belonged to a neighboring ranch. Pete Mattern worked for Jim. They all talked at once. They asked him questions, told him his horse had gone past the neighboring ranch about an hour ago and they'd taken it over to Logan's ranch, got Mattern and started looking for him. They said he was all covered with blood, that he was a hell of a sight. Then they stopped talking, and Jim knew they were looking at him. There was a deep silence, and Jim knew that they were noticing that he didn't look at them, that he seemed not to see them.

"Where is my horse?" he asked harshly.

"Right here," said a voice that was Curley Wells'. "Right beside you, Jim."

But Curley's voice was strained. Jim Logan reached out and groped for the saddlehorn. He found the stirrup, and swung up into the saddle.

TRY as he might, he could not keep the ulcerous thoughts from his mind that kept crowding in on him as he rode slowly on through the darkness. Broke. . . . Blind. . . . Sid with counterfeit money. . . . Sid, out riding near where Jim Logan had been shot. . . .

Just a little while ago he could have dismissed those things. But now he couldn't. Now his heart seemed to be turning to stone. His mind seemed to be opening up to accept the ugly, rancorous suspicions it would have rejected before.

Now it seemed that all things were possible. It seemed that there was no kindness, no charity, no loyalty, nothing worth while in all the men he had known. Any of them might have done this to him. Or Sid might have done it. . . .

They came to the ranch, and a hand reached up to help him off his horse. He shook the hand off and stumbled as he dismounted by himself. He stumbled as he went up the steps to the porch. He felt his way into his room and sank wearily down on the bed. He heard steps come to his door. They stopped, and a voice that was Pete Mattern's came to Jim Logan.

"Curley Wells has gone for a doctor," said Mattern.

Jim nodded. Then the steps went away again. The house was silent—and dark. There were lights, but Jim Logan couldn't see them.

Then the doctor came. He patched up Jim's shoulder. He examined his head.

"The shock of that bullet grazing your head has caused your blindness, Jim," he said. "It might be cured. A good surgeon might trepan your skull and lift that pressure."

"And where is there a good surgeon?" Jim asked.

"There's one in New York," said Doc Shaffer. "It would take a lot of money to get him out here."

Jim Logan didn't say anything. So a lot of money was needed! He knew his lips were twisted into bitter lines again. A lot of money, and he was broke! He didn't have a dime. . . .

The doctor went away, and Jim sat there, wondering if he would ever learn the difference between night and day. He fretted at the slow passing time.

Pete Mattern came to the door. "Your brother and your girl are comin'," he told Jim. "They just rode up together."

Jim didn't say anything. His brother? Sid wasn't his brother.

"Them two sure are a pair," Mattern went on. "If a gent didn't know that Barbara Brandon was in love with you, he'd think she was in love with Sid."

In love with Sid. . . . Funny that he had never thought of that before. They'd always been like brother and sister, it had seemed to Jim.

Then, there in the darkness, Jim's mind called up a picture of Barbara, laughing, holding hands with Sid as they came in from a ride in the hills, while Jim had been working like hell to make the ranch go. Barbara and Sid had been together a lot. They seemed to understand each other. Maybe there was something to what Mattern said.

Jim heard the tap of tiny boot heels, and knew that Barbara was coming. He recognized her step. He hadn't known he could do that before. He could recognize Sid's steps, too. And it was strange how a picture of those two came to his eyes when he couldn't see them. In his mind's eye, he could see Barbara and Sid. He could tell that they were close to him, standing there, looking at him.

Then he heard a sob, and Barbara's hands were on his own.

"Jim," she said, "it's—it's horrible. I can't stand it!"

Jim eased his hands out from under Barbara's. "Yeah, it's horrible. But blubberin' about it won't help any."

He was surprised at the harshness, the intolerance, the utter unfeelingness of his own voice.

"Jim," said Sid, "don't take it that way. I've talked to Doc Shaffer. I've—"

"To hell with you!" Jim snapped. "To hell with both of you!"

There was an utter silence, and Jim Logan wondered why he'd said that just then. He didn't know anything for sure. All he had to go on were just the bills in Sid's wallet, just what Mattern had said, just the fact that Sid had been out there where he'd been shot. . . .

"You—you don't mean that, do you, Jim?" asked Barbara.

"Of course he doesn't mean it," Sid said. "Do you, Jim?"

Try as he might, Jim couldn't wipe from his lips the bitterness he knew was there. Try as he might, he couldn't get those hellish suspicions out of his mind, couldn't whip that certainty that was making him mean and cold and hard and unfeeling. . . .

"Do I look like I'm telling a fairy tale?" he asked harshly.

"No," said Sid Logan softly. "I don't know what it's all about, but if that's the way you want it, I won't be back."

THEIR boot heels faded. The sound of their horses leaving the ranch yard sank into nothingness, and Jim pictured them riding away together, as he had seen them ride away together so many times before. That had no significance then. But it had now.

Pete Mattern came back in the room. "The news has got out and around about what happened to you," he told Jim. "The banker in town says that you sold your cattle for counterfeit money and that you was broke. And the Doc says it'll be a miracle if you ever see again. The boys wondered if you wanted them to stick around or if they better go and look for other jobs. They wondered if you had the money to pay them off and I didn't know. I told 'em I'd ask you."

"I don't have a damned dime," said Jim Logan.

"That's what I thought."

Pete Mattern went out, and pretty soon Jim heard some horses leave the ranch. Then the ranch was shrouded in silence, and Jim felt as though he were all alone in a huge black void of a world. He could see nothing. Hour after hour, it seemed, he sat there. He could hear nothing. He yelled suddenly, called loudly for Pete Mattern. His voice seemed to ring hollowly through the empty house. Then boot heels sounded, and Jim knew them to be Mattern's.

"It's early morning," Pete said. "I was gettin' some breakfast. Do you want something to eat?"

Jim Logan twisted his lips down into that hateful slant again. "Of course I want something to eat. Just because I can't see, do you expect me to sit here and starve?"

Pete didn't say anything for a little while. And when his voice did come to Jim, there was a little irony in it, just a touch of cruelty.

"Well," he said at last, "you could."

Jim opened his mouth. Then he closed it. He could, at that. He'd chased Sid and Barbara away. He'd listened to his men ride off. Pete Mattern was the only man here. If Pete should leave, he'd be just about helpless. As unaccustomed as Jim was to this hellish darkness, he'd have a hell of a time getting along alone. He'd been so busy feeling sorry for himself that he'd forgotten all about everything else.

He was so filled with the venom of his own bitterness that he thought of nothing but that—that, and about Sid. . . . He'd accepted Sid as a brother. But, after all, he didn't know what kind of blood was in him. Maybe Sid was the kind of a skunk that would do this. Maybe he'd decided to break Jim when he'd discovered Jim wasn't going to shell out a whole lot of money on him.

"I'll bring you a couple of eggs," Pete said, and it seemed to Jim that he heard a chuckle as Mattern went out through the house again.

The eggs were brought and Jim ate them in silence. He listened to the sound of a horse that came into the yard, boots that clumped into his room.

"I'm Whipple," said a voice that Jim recognized as belonging to the Sheriff of Hachita. "I come to see you about Sid."

"What about Sid?" Jim asked slowly.

"Sid got into a little trouble in town," Whipple said. "He passed some counterfeit money, and the banker had him arrested. Sid claims that he won it in a poker game from a gent that came out to his place. He claims he didn't know it was counterfeit. But the banker says he thinks there's something behind it all, with you sellin' all your cattle for bum money, and Sid havin' a lot of it, and him not sellin' any cattle. A lot of other people think the same thing, too. What do you think? Do you figure Sid was behind that stunt that broke you? If you do, and can prove it, I can keep Sid in jail. If you can't, I might as well let him go."

"I guess there's no doubt it was him," said Mattern's voice from the doorway.

"Mebby so," said Whipple, "but you have to prove things before you can send a man to jail. Mebby he did win the money in a poker game."

Jim Logan sat there and his mind raced. It would do no good to try to pin anything on Sid. Jim was filled with ugly suspicions of him; he was almost certain that Sid was mixed up in it somewhere; but, as Whipple said, you had to prove things. Suspicions weren't worth a damn. . . .

"I don't know, Whipple," Jim replied. "I didn't know the fellow that gave me the money, and I can't prove that Sid did. As far as I'm concerned, you can let him go."

"If you do know something and are holding it back just because Sid's your adopted brother," Whipple said as he rose to go, "I think you're a damn fool. Anybody that would play a trick like that doesn't deserve any consideration."

Whipple went out. The beat of his horse's hoofs came in to Jim, and he wondered why Whipple hadn't mentioned the man Jim had shot out there in the hills; the rustler who had been stealing the cattle. He had been hit bad. He'd been shot through and through. He couldn't have crawled off, so someone must have taken him away. That someone must have been Sid, because Jim had seen Sid gambling with him in town. The rustler and Sid were partners. . . . And Jim Logan kept thinking about Sid and Barbara, and about what Pete Mattern had said. He *could* sit here and starve. . . . Somehow, that seemed to have a special significance to Jim Logan.

SOMEHOW, now, Jim began to wonder about Pete Mattern. Why was Pete here when everybody else was gone? If Pete was kinder of heart than the others, and was staying here just because he felt sorry for Jim, he could have left unsaid some of the things he had uttered. It was Mattern who had called Jim's attention to Sid and Barbara. And he had said Jim *could* sit here and starve. He had seemed to chuckle, as though with satisfaction, when he'd said that, as though he was glad to put Jim Logan in his place. . . .

He didn't know Pete Mattern very well. He hadn't worked for him long, not as long as some of the men who had left when Jim went broke and was blinded. Why had Pete taken things in his own hands? Why had the other punchers asked Pete instead of Jim Logan, if he wanted them to stay or leave? When everybody else seemed to be heartless, when everybody else seemed to have worked a wrong on Jim Logan, why was Pete Mattern different?

Jim tried to tell himself that he was suspicious of everyone now. He tried to tell himself that his bitterness had warped him, made him biased, so that he looked for underhanded motives in everything. Sid was the one to suspect. Sid was behind it. Even the folks in town suspected that. It was obvious. It was almost an open and shut case. Sid Logan

was an ungrateful pup, a would-be murderer.

Doc Shaffer came out again next day.

"I've just got in touch with that surgeon," he told Jim. "He's willing to come and operate on your skull, to take the pressure off that nerve which controls your sight. He's willing to do it as an experiment and I feel sure that I think I can arrange it so it won't cost you anything. He feels confident he can make you see. I told him to come on."

Jim gripped hard on the edge of the chair.

"He'll be here in a few days," Doc Shaffer finished.

Then the doctor went out, and Jim began to count the minutes in the days that passed. They were long and torturing minutes that dragged like eternities, those minutes till he could see, till he could open his eyes and look at Sid and Barbara, and see for himself the things he suspected. He'd been a fool not to suspect it, even before he was shot. He'd been a fool not to know that you couldn't pick somebody out of a gutter and expect him to turn out right, as old Bill Logan had tried to do with Sid. . . .

Jim Logan's lips twisted into fresh lines of bitterness as he thought of that. Sid Logan was a dog that bit the hand that had fed him. He was a dirty, low-down crook, but nothing could be proved on him. There was nothing to be done till Jim's sight was restored. Then there would be something to do. Then Jim Logan would take a gun in his hand and kill Sid. He'd kill the man who had taken everything in the world from him, his ranch, his sight, his girl. . . .

One day, two, then three. . . . Then the rattle of buckboard wheels. Doc Shaffer's boots clumped into the hall, and someone else was coming along beside him.

"Doctor Carew, Jim," said Shaffer, introducing a spectacled, gray-haired gent.

Doc Carew examined Jim's head.

"It's a gamble," he told him finally. "Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the nerve that controls your sight is injured. Then there could be a blood clot caused by the bullet crease. When the clot pressure is removed you might be able to see or you might not."

"I don't have anything to lose and a lot to gain," Jim said. "If you're ready to gamble, I am."

JIM LOGAN had to smile when he thought of that, while they laid him out, prepared him for the operation. He had more to gain than they thought. With his sight he would not regain his ranch. He would not get back his cattle. But he would be able to see Sid Logan over the end of a gun. He'd be able to shoot. . . .

The heavy, sickening odor of chloroform filled his nostrils. A distant roaring sound came to his ears. That roaring was still in his ears when he regained consciousness.

He heard voices that seemed dim, distant. He was weak and sick, and that odor of chloroform was still over him.

"I've put bandages over his eyes because I want him to be still," said a voice he guessed was Doc Carew's. "I don't want him to take them off for at least three or four days. I don't want him to have the nervous shock of either seeing or not seeing till he has a chance to feel better."

There were other voices, but they faded again. Nausea came to Jim. Blackness swooped in on him. He dreamed of Sid, of confronting him with a gun. He dreamed that Mattern was standing there laughing at him as he killed Sid, telling him that was a hell of a good joke.

Then Jim Logan was conscious. He was fully awake. His mind was clear

now. That sickening smell of chloroform was still there, but fainter now. He moved.

Mattern's voice came to him. "You awake Jim?"

"Yes, I'm awake."

"You feel like hell, maybe," said Mattern. "The Doc said you'd feel all in and sick. He left and said he'd done all he could. And Doc Shaffer went along with him. They said you'd either see now, or you wouldn't ever see. They said to tell you to lift off the bandages from your eyes just as soon as you woke up and find out if you could see. They seemed to think you'd feel better when you knew you'd be able to see. So lift those things off your eyes, and see if you can see me."

Jim Logan started his hands up toward his eyes. Then he stopped them. Dazedly, he remembered hearing that doctor's voice, instructing that he should *not* take the bandages off.

That hadn't been a dream. That thing about Mattern laughing had been a dream. But the voice hadn't. Mattern was a liar. He was trying to find out if Jim could see. He was willing to risk ruining the effects of the operation to find that out. Why?

Jim started his hands up to his eyes again. He lifted the bandages slowly. He opened his eyes, and a blessed flow of light streamed into his eyes. He could *see!* The light hurt him, blazed in his eyes like a great white searchlight. But he could see. He opened his mouth. Then he closed it. Why was Mattern so damn interested? Why had he lied?

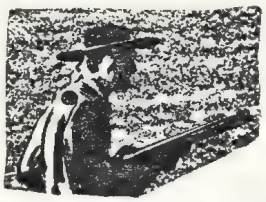
Jim Logan put the bandages back. He let his hands fall down beside him. He shook his head weakly.

"I'm blind as a bat," he said.

JIM LOGAN lay there and wondered why he had lied. He wondered why he thought that Pete Mattern gave a sort of sigh of relief when Jim had said he was still blind. Was that imagination? Was that voice that ordered him to keep his eyes covered just a dream? Was there someone other than Sid behind all these strange happenings?

Jim didn't move. Pete Mattern went out. He often went out of the house. He seemed to stay out a long time. Jim remembered that now. There was no stock. There was no one but just the two of them on the ranch. Where did Mattern go when he went out?

Jim eased out of bed. He was dizzy, shaky, and his head throbbed fearfully as he rose. He stole out to the hallway, stopped near the door and peered out into the dusk of evening. Mattern was out near the bunkhouse. He was standing at the door, talking to someone who was in the bunkhouse. They were too far distant for Jim to hear their voices. But he could see Mattern's lips move, could see the occasional impatient gesture



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that he made to the person who was in the bunkhouse.

Then Mattern stopped. He stepped away from the bunkhouse door and watched a rider come toward the ranch. Jim squinted through the dusk and recognized that rider as Sid. Sid stopped and talked to Mattern. It looked as though they were arguing.

Then Mattern raised his voice and said something like, "You're in it as deep as I am."

They talked some more, then Sid dismounted and went in the bunkhouse for a moment. Pretty soon he came out and rode away. Mattern shut the door, locked it, started toward the house.

Jim staggered back along the hallway and got in bed before Mattern came past the room. Mattern didn't stop to look in on him. He went on past, into the room he'd been sleeping in ever since Jim had been shot. Jim lay there and waited. Why had Mattern locked the bunkhouse door? There was someone inside.

It grew dark. The night stilled. Jim finally rose, pulled on his breeches, and stole shakily down the hall again. He staggered as he went across the yard and stopped at the bunkhouse door.

At first there seemed to be no light in there, but a little yellow dot of gold showed thinly where a crack in the door let light seep through. Jim stooped and peered inside. There was a lamp on a table.

He saw a man lying on a bunk, with a bloody bandage about his chest. He saw another man seated on a bunk at the far side of the room. There were blankets up over the windows, to keep the light from being seen. The man in the bunk turned, and his face became visible to Jim. It was the man who had been stealing his cattle, the man he had shot, the fellow Jim had seen Sid gambling with in town. . . .

Jim Logan straightened. He smiled as he staggered back to the house. He got a gun from a drawer of the table in his room, loaded it and thrust it down under his shirt, inside his pants.

He lay down on the bed and waited for that rush of blood to leave his head, that made it throb and spin. The thin smile on his lips was cold and merciless and ironic. Sid was in this thing just as Mattern had said. 'Just as deep as I am. . . .' Both of them were in it. The two men out there in the bunkhouse were in it, too.

Mattern was probably just waiting till the wounded man was able to travel before he pulled out. That's why he had stayed. He kept the bunkhouse locked so nobody would wander in there. He kept the windows blanketed so no one could see the light. He hadn't noticed the crack in the door. That was why Mattern was so damned anxious to know if Jim could see. He knew if Jim could see, that he might go to the bunkhouse before the wounded man was able to travel.

Hatred surged up in Jim Logan anew. He lay there and smiled up into the darkness of his room. He could see, but they didn't know that. They were waiting till one of them was able to travel before they cleared out. Well, Jim would wait too. He'd wait till the shock of this operation left him, till the shake went out of his hands, and the weakness left his legs.

Then he would show them, the four of them, that to rob a Logan meant to fight him. Old Bill Logan had taught many a rustler that in the old days. Many a rope had been stretched from the cottonwoods down near the corral. Many a rustler had died from lead poisoning out in the hills, when old Bill Logan had tried to get his start. He hadn't gotten much of a one. But he had always fought. And that would be what Jim Logan would do.

He'd go out there with a gun in his hand. With all of them together, Sid and those three others, Jim would fight for his new start, just as old Bill Logan had fought for his. . . .

He groped his way down the hallway every day. The feel of the gun against his belly was cold. He sat out on the porch in the old rocker and gazed off across the hills, in the direction of Sid's ranch. With eyes that Pete Mattern thought were sightless, he looked off across the flats that used to graze his cattle. But there were no cattle now. Sid and Mattern and those two crooks in the bunkhouse had stolen them. And for that, they'd die.

As Jim sat there on the porch, he saw a rider coming off across the flat. He knew it to be Sid. He saw Mattern go to the bunkhouse door and say something to one of the men inside, then come back to the porch, and stand by the upright post at its end while he watched Sid come on. Mattern's lips were tight. His eyes were bright. He seemed tense, and Jim wondered why.

Finally Mattern turned and looked at Jim. He smiled. But Jim didn't let on that he saw it. He looked past Mattern, with the steady, unwavering gaze of a blind man. It wouldn't be time till Sid came inside the yard. Then. . . .

"I DON'T know why I'm going to tell you this," Mattern said suddenly, "unless it's because I sort of hate to send a man to hell without him knowing it, Seems like he ought to have a minute to get himself set."

Mattern stopped, looking out toward Sid again. Jim had a hard time trying to keep his eyes off Mattern. What the hell was Mattern talking about, anyway? But Jim didn't let his eyes waver. He sat there and watched the flat, seeing everything, yet appearing not to see anything with his eyes fixed straight ahead.

"What are you talking about, Mattern?" Jim asked.

"I'm talking about you," said Mattern. "About you and Sid. You're going to kill him, then you're going to kill yourself. You hate his guts so much for the things you think he did, that you're going to shoot him. Then you're going to blow your own brains out because you're so disappointed in not getting your sight back. Wouldn't that be logical? Everybody knows that Sid crooked you. Everybody suspects it, knows you had a break with him. Wouldn't it be logical for you to shoot him if you could, then shoot yourself because you couldn't see?"

Jim strained mightily to keep his eyes straight ahead. Mattern was looking at him again, but Mattern mustn't suspect.

"Yes," admitted Jim, "that's logical, all right. But what makes you think it's going to happen?"

"It's going to happen because I'm going to make it happen," said Mattern. "And I'm going to make it happen because I'm going to have to kill Sid in just a couple of minutes, and since I have to kill him, I'll have to kill you too, because you could tell folks that I did it."

"Don't you think you'd better start at the beginning," Jim asked. "Hadn't you better tell me all of it? It sounds crazy, the way you tell it now."

"I might as well," said Mattern. "It'll pass the time till Sid gets here. And as I said, I hate to send a man to hell without him knowing why. It dates back to when you bought out Sid's interest in the ranch. I was here then, and I remember he raised hell about what you gave him. He said you cheated him, that the ranch was worth twice what you told him it was. So he got on a nasty drunk in town and talked to a pal of mine who was up here hiding away from the Border law. He said you was a skin-flint money-grabber, and you'd do anything for a dollar.

"He offered to tell my pal where there was a bunch of your stock that would be easy to get out of the country if my pal would steal them and give him a split. My pardner had an idea. He told the kid, okay, that he'd steal your cattle and give him a split. So he come out here and we arranged with the gent that bought your cattle to come up and give you worthless money for it. We figured you'd jump at that money like a hungry wolf at a maverick calf. Then I sent some money over to your brother, and my pal told him that it was his split of the cattle we stole.

"Sid tried to hedge then. He said he was drunk and didn't know what he was saying. But he finally took the money. He didn't know it was counterfeit, of course. He didn't know you'd sold your cows for bum paper. So he tried to pass some of the money, and they put him in jail for it. When he come out here and tried to raise hell about it, we told him he was in for it, that he made a dicker to take a split on some stolen cattle. He was just as crooked as we were.

"Then he got the bright idea that it was us that shot you. He raved like hell, and threatened to shoot us. He sold his ranch to hire the doctor to operate on you. He's been over here every couple days to find out if you can see. He swears and be damned that if you don't get your sight back, he'll kill us all. So we have to kill him to keep his trap shut. If we ran out without killing him, we'd have the law on our trail for that counterfeit deal. He'd blab. So the only thing to do is kill him. And after we kill him, the only thing to do is to kill you. Now you see how it is?"

Jim nodded slowly. Sid was nearly to the ranch gate now.

"It was me that shot you out there in the hills," Mattern went on. "I thought you was dead, but I had to go out and bring you in when Curley Wells and those gents from the B-Y came past. And I had to figure some way to take care of the gent you shot. He was bad off. So I got rid of the hands and put him in the bunkhouse and stalled Sid for time till my pard was able to travel. He's on his feet now. Him and another gent are out in the bunkhouse now, waiting till Sid gets near enough to shoot. Then I'll shoot you in the head. We'll move Sid up close, where there's only one answer —just murder and suicide. I'll tell the law that's how it happened. I'll send my pards on ahead. Then I'll catch up with them."

Mattern stopped. A heavy silence seemed to hang over the place. Young Sid was at the gate.

He dismounted and started to walk slowly, sort of stiff-legged, toward Mattern. Jim watched him, and felt the gun against his belly. The kid was going to go through with it.

He was going to try to kill the gents who had robbed and shot Jim. It put a lump in Jim's throat to think of Sid trying to do that. . . .

JIM LOGAN turned his head and looked at Mattern. He looked him in the eye and smiled a little as he let his right hand go inside his shirt front and grasp the butt of his gun.

Mattern's eyes widened. His jaw fell. Sudden realization that he'd been talking to a man who could see, flooded his features. He cursed and whipped his hand for a gun. It came up as Jim's tore out of his shirt front.

They bellowed, almost together. Jim felt a giant hand smash him in the shoulder, and he fell back across the chair. He saw Sid, two guns in his hands, shooting at the fellow in the bunkhouse door. But Sid was taking more than he sent, because the fellow at the bunkhouse had leaped inside and was shooting around the door edge.

The guns bellowed thunderously as Jim Logan started to move across the yard. His shoulder throbbed as bullets came at him like hornets. He heard their whine and felt their burn, and he thought of how funny it was to be fighting for Sid. Just a few moments ago he had wanted to kill him!

Jim went down, and blackness swooped toward him. He listened to Sid cursing as he kept on shooting, and Jim got up again. He staggered toward the bunkhouse door while Sid lay on the ground and pumped bullets through it. Then Sid rose and limped forward as Jim pushed the door in.

But there was no one left to shoot at. The wounded rustler was on the floor, his arms outspread. The other gent was huddled down beside the door jamb.

Sid was covered with blood. He looked as miserable as hell, as though he had something on his chest that he wanted to get off. Jim thought he knew what it was. The kid was going to come clean and tell all he knew; and Jim realized it was going to hurt like hell to admit that he'd been such a damn fool. The kid was brimming over with remorse. It was going to hurt him like the devil to say the things he'd have to say to Jim. And somehow, Jim didn't want the kid to be hurt. A fellow who would sell his ranch to get Jim Logan's eyes back for him couldn't be all bad.

Jim turned one of the dead men over. He looked at the face of the cattle buyer, the gent who had given him the counterfeit money. He reached into the hombre's pocket and pulled out a roll of yellowbacks, good ones, old weather-worn bills Jim knew were from the proceeds of his own cattle. He grinned up at Sid.

"I heard about a fellow who sold his ranch to get my eyesight back," he said. "And I heard about the suspicions that some folks had that the same gent was mixed up in a counterfeit deal. But I guess this pins the lie on that, Sid. And to show you how I feel about it, I'd rather have you back with me than to get a place of your own. But you can take your choice. I'll pay you back the money you put out on the doc, or I'll give you a half interest in a going place.

And Sid did what Jim knew he would do. Only a damn fool would tell what Sid had to tell, after Jim Logan had gone to the trouble of proving him innocent.

Jim smiled as he rode across the range later on, his new wound bandaged, his hopes high. He was going toward the Brandon place, where he would see Barbara. Jim Logan would have a damn sight harder time getting things straightened out than Sid had had. He was going to have to face the music with Barbara Brandon, and try to alibi himself for telling her, the girl he was going to marry, to go to hell. But he had an idea he'd manage, somehow.

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RENEGADE

By Cliff Farrell

The golden fortune he'd toiled for in the wild California camps and the honor he'd so valiantly fought to maintain, were suddenly snatched from young Jay Rush. . . . For a dead man had branded Jay with the crimson murder-mark—and trail-wolf guns only awaited Jay's exile to destroy the helpless men and women of that treasure-loaded caravan!

THEY dug the grave secretly after nightfall inside the wagon circle. The slatting of the canvas hoods in the chill wind and the eerie yammering of coyotes out in the black wall of darkness united in a mournful dirge as Willis Cartwright, the captain of the caravan, read the last prayer for the bullwhacker who had been found at dawn with an arrow in his heart.

There was fear as well as grief in the low sobbing of the five women scattered

WAGON SCOUT

Smashing novelette of the Overland Trail

Jay hit the saddle and wheeled the roan around in a startled leap. He fired one warning shot over the heads of the crowd. . . .

among the score of men grouped around the grave. As the spades became busy, filling in the long, narrow rectangle, eyes uneasily searched the darkness and ears keened the wind for sign of danger. All of the light-hearted gaiety that had carried the eastbound caravan over the Sierras, on as far as the valley of the Salt Lake, was extinguished.

There was gold stored in several of the ten broad-tired prairie wagons, whose tilts loomed high in the flickering firelight —gold that had been ripped from virgin placer bars and gravel banks in the Mother Lode country of California.

The majority of the men and women in the caravan were Forty-niners, who had gone to the promised land in the great rush four years earlier. And now they were retracing their steps over the Cali-

fornia trail, many with their fortunes made, some with nothing but shattered hopes as their reward for years of toil and privation.

In the circle about the grave, Willis Cartwright's daughter moved to the side of a bronzed, square-chinned man with sandy hair. She slipped her small, trembling hand into his palm, as though seeking protection from the unseen dangers of the surrounding wilderness. Her shoulder pressed against him. He looked down at her comfortingly, as he would at a child.

His weather-puckered eyes seemed almost on the point of smiling, and the lines of his forceful, straight mouth softened a little. He wore a doeskin hunting shirt that molded easily against the depth of his chest. The customary cowhide boots and dark woolen breeches of the great trail completed his garb. But it was the hunting shirt, of Indian make, that seemed especially in keeping with the deep, coppery-bronze texture of his clean-shaven features. A ball pistol and a hunting knife, with a buckskin-wrapped handle, were thrust in his wide leathern belt.

Maidie Cartwright was piquant and well groomed in her bonnet and cape and wide-skirted woolen dress. Her dark eyes turned up to this doeskin-shirted frontiersman, wide and alluring. But he released her hand, and moved to escape the touch of her shoulder. At that, she pouted.

"Why do you always avoid me, Jay Rush?" she demanded.

THE man she called Jay Rush looked down at her with absent slate-gray eyes. She had sensed long ago that this man carried a secret in his heart; and she had tried vainly for days and weeks, by every feminine artifice, to draw it from him. For an instant she believed he was on the point of divulging it.

Then his straight lips tightened. He offered his arm again with strict formality. "Let me see you to your wagon, Miss Cartwright," he said casually. "Don't worry about this any more. It was tough that Dan Beal had to die. He was a good man. But it was likely only a lone Digger or Piute that weasled up on him as he drowsed there on stock guard last night. There's been no more sign of Indians all day. Likely we won't have any more trouble."

She was unconvinced, palpably fearful, as he escorted her to the wagon that she occupied with her parents. Her mother was engaged in whispering gossip with other wives at a distant wagon.

The girl detained Jay Rush when he started to turn away. "You — you're sure we'll get back safely to Independence?" she asked tremulously.

"Of course. What's to stop us?"

"The season is so late. It's October already, and we're only as far as the Great Basin. Winter is near. I saw the snow on the mountains ahead—the ones you call the Wasatch Range. And they say that the Mormons in Salt Lake City will rob us, and—and that the plains Indians on the Platte will massacre us."

He patted her hand. "Don't let that litte mouth of yours droop like that. It wasn't intended to carry such worry. You've been heedin' some of these fools that have mush in their craws. We're well on our way back to the settlements. We'll make it."

"If we take this new southern route by way of Santa Fé, we can avoid all chance of trouble," she argued.

"There's no wagon trail down there," he said.

"There is," she protested. "The trapper, Buck Barker, who joined the caravan today, has a map showing every stream, every mountain range. He just came back from Santa Fé, after guiding a train through. The trail is easy, and there is no danger of Indian trouble.

Jay Rush's glance turned to where a heavy, sun-swart man in moccasins and grimy fringed buckskins stood, surrounded by an eager group of men and women. The moccasined man had come riding out of the sage wastes at noon, to throw in with the caravan, and the Californians were eating up his bold stories of the southern trail. He looked up as Jay glanced his way. For an instant Buck Barker's pale, greenish eyes met the level gaze of Jay Rush. Then they shifted away.

"Maps aren't hard to draw," Jay told the girl tersely. "Don't let your father be stampeded into trying trails that nobody knows anything about."

"Hugh Lucas is in favor of turning south," she persisted. "And so am I, and mother. I don't understand why you oppose it. The map shows plainly that we can reach Santa Fé easily."

She slipped her hands into his, drew him close, and looked up at him appealingly. "For my sake, I want you to vote to let Buck Barker guide us over this new trail," she murmured.

"Vote?" he echoed, startled.

"Yes. Dad is calling a council meeting. They're building up the fire now. Dad feels the same way mother does—that we can avoid hardship and fighting by abandoning the South Pass trail here, and going by way of Santa Fé. Several others agree with him. The rest are on the fence. They're waiting to hear from you, and they'll vote as you do. They place reliance in your opinion."

Jay turned. Wagon men were bringing in sagebrush, heaping it on the central fire. With an exclamation of dismay, Jay left the girl and strode to where Willis Cartwright and the hard-visaged guide, Buck Barker, stood.

BUCK BARKER stepped quickly into the background as Jay came up and touched the arm of a scholarly looking man who had been elected captain of the caravan. Willis Cartwright had been a dealer in California land and mining claims. It was rumored that he had accumulated a modest fortune which was cached in his wagon.

"Mr. Cartwright, I understand there's some talk of trying an unknown route to Santa Fé, an' abandoning the Overland," Jay said. "I've been down in that country. "It's hell on wheels—mountains without water, sand and rock deserts, an' big sinks where all you'll find is death."

It was Buck Barker that Cartwright looked to for an answer. Barker spat scornfully into the fire. "Maybe yuh'd rather steer 'em by way o' Salt Lake so that the Saints can tax an' rob 'em, an' turn 'em out on the trail on foot for the Injuns to finish off."

Jay studied Buck Barker's dark, hard features. Somewhere in the past he had seen that broad, flat face, with its wide flaring nostrils and thick, sensuous lips. Barker was not a man to trust, by his appearance.

But the Cartwright wagon company was on the border of panic. For days, rumors of Indian warfare on the great plains, and of the hostility of the Mormons, whose desert empire they were now entering, had been sweeping the caravan. The discovery of the slain bullwhacker, with an arrow jutting from his body, had brought these misgivings to a head. And on the heels of that had come Buck Barker out of nowhere, proclaiming himself a trail guide, willing to lead them over what he claimed to be a safe route, for a small fee per wagon.

"I prospected and trapped down the Green River before the rush of '49," Jay stated. "I've crossed the mountains to Santa Fé on the back of a mule, an' it was hard doings, I tell you. No wagon can make it. It's a land where white men and white women will only leave their bones to shine in the sun."

Buck Barker shrugged. He saw that the majority of men in the party listened to Jay with respect. Willis Cartwright held to the formal title of captain, but Jay, against his will, had been placed in the role of the real leader.

Willis Cartwright chewed his long underlip. He was resentful of Jay's standing with the company.

The circle stood silent and doubtful. "I reckon we better keep on by way of Salt Lake," a man murmured reluctantly. "Jay Rush has showed that he savvies the trail. An' we don't know anythin' about this man Barker."

A young Kentuckian named Hugh Lucas stepped forward, his hot dark eyes snapping a challenge at Jay. "And I move we turn south by way of Santa Fé," he blazed. "We know as much about Buck Barker as we do about Jay Rush. None of us had ever laid eyes on Jay Rush before the day in Carson Pass that he joined up with the caravan."

Hugh Lucas looked around. "I demand that we vote on it," he shouted. "All in favor of going by the easy way, lift your voices. Aye!"

The response was faint and scattered. No more than half a dozen men chimed in. One of them was Willis Cartwright, who flushed when he discovered that the majority preferred to follow Jay Rush's advice.

Hugh Lucas' sensitive face fell. Then he shrugged. "You win, Rush," he muttered sulkily. "You win—again."

The council meeting broke up. Jay pushed to Willis Cartwright's side. "We'll get through," he said placatingly. "I'm—"

Willis Cartwright turned his back, burning with injured pride. Jay, rebuffed, walked slowly back to his wagon, which was loaded with furs, on which he hoped to make a small profit in the St. Louis market.

Maidie Cartwright stood awaiting him. "I'll—I'll never forgive you," she blazed.

She made a pretense of turning petulantly away, but he stayed her with a touch of his hand. She paused willingly. "This is no time to take chances," he told her gravely. "I'm not ignoring the dangers ahead, nor am I tryin' to say it'll be easy. But I have no faith in this Buck Barker, nor the map he flashes. The map don't show the mountains an' deserts that I have seen with my own eyes."

She moved closer to him. Her lips were near, inviting. Jay Rush would not have been a man if he had not bent and touched her lips with his own. Swiftly her slim arms went around his neck, and she clung close to him. She laughed triumphantly.

"You've avoided me so long," she said happily. "And now you're going to tell me just who you are, and why nobody in this caravan knows anything about you or your past."

The expression that came into his face brought petulance and anger back to her own countenance.

"I'm Jay Rush," he said curtly. "That should be explanation enough."

With a gasp of indignation, she sped away, her skirts flying around her slender ankles. Jay moodily watched her climb into her wagon. Maidie Cartwright was young and attractive. But in his heart Jay could not respond to her allure.

CHAPTER TWO

Death at Dawn

AT A distance, squatting in the shadows of a wagon, Buck Barker shrewdly studied young Hugh Lucas, who stood nearby. From their position, both had seen Maidie Cartwright in Jay's arms. And Barker marked the jealousy that flamed white-hot in Hugh Lucas' face.

" 'Tain't the first time a gal has lost

her head over that *pelado,*" Barker remarked casually. "He ain't fit to even look at a gal like that."

Hugh Lucas turned swiftly. "What do you know about Jay Rush?" he demanded.

"Don't know anythin' about a man of that name. The last time I cut his trail he wasn't known as Jay Rush."

Lucas squatted quickly at Barker's side, bent close. "Talk, man," he insisted. "What do you know about that fellow?"

"I seen him more'n once in the diggin's when the claim-jumpers' war was goin' on," Barker said, with a twisted grin. "I don't reckon I'd forget a man like that, an' neither would you, once you knew who he really is. He went by the name of Jason Slade then."

"Jason Slade!" The words were jerked out of Lucas. "Good God! Him? The murderer of Duke Secrist? The man who—?"

"Don't go bellerin' like a fool," Barker snapped. "That's Jason Slade, the coward that killed Duke Secrist in a framed gun duel. Slade was run out'n every camp where he showed his face. He dropped out'n sight two years ago."

Scorn and mounting triumph gripped Hugh Lucas. He was madly in love with Maidie Cartwright, but lately she had been flouting his attentions in favor of Jay.

"Why, the sneaking, black-hearted devil!" Lucas panted. He came to his feet.

"Use yore head," Barker warned, detaining him. "I know how much you think of that purty little gal. Don't do nothin' that will humiliate her. She's lost her head over that cold-blooded skunk, an' she wouldn't thank you for paradin' her mistake in front of the whole company."

"Do you think I could let her go on believing that he's fit to make love to her?" Lucas groaned.

"The easiest way for her is not to let her know," Barker argued. "I'd shove my cards in the face of this fake Jay Rush. Tell him to stay clear of the gal. Let him know you've tabbed him for what he really is. Bnt don't let on that the news come from me. I aim to keep an eye on him an' see why he's steerin' this train into the hands of them gold-hungry Mormons. Likely he's standin' in with the Saints."

"You're right," Lucas rasped. "I'll do it that way."

He strode to where Jay was preparing to turn in. Jay looked up. When he saw the harsh expression of his visitor, he straightened slowly, waiting in silence.

"Keep away from Maidie Cartwright," Lucas said hoarsely, keeping his voice low. "You ought to be tarred and railed out of camp—Jason Slade!"

Jay's jaws hardened. "I've wondered how long it would be before someone recognized me," he remarked slowly.

"You've fooled us for weeks," Lucas spat. "Not until tonight did I realize you were the murderer who—"

The sudden icy flicker in Jay's eyes stopped him. "I killed Duke Secrist in a gun duel, man to man, at twenty paces," Jay rasped. "I was tried by a judge and jury in Saeramento, and exonerated. I'm no murderer. Don't use that word against me."

"You may have been cleared legally, Slade, but before God and man, you killed a human being in cold blood. It was brought out at the trial that Secrist's pistol was unloaded. He went into that duel a doomed man without a chance for his life."

Jay's hand shot out, wound in the front of Lucas' jacket, jerking him close. "Damn you!" he said bitterly. "I don't have to defend myself to every yapping cur that crosses my path. I'm Jason Slade, yes. Make the most of it."

Hugh Lucas pulled himself furiously

free. "I care nothing about your guilt or innocence," he raged. "It's Maidie Cartwright I'm thinking about. I don't intend to have her disgraced by association with you. Stay clear of her from now on. Your secret is safe with me. I'm not out to hound you, but I'll expose you if you try to thrust your attentions on a trusting, innocent girl."

Jay restrained the desire to smash his fist into the scornful face of the love-maddened Kentuckian. Instead, he stepped back.

"In the morning I'll tell Miss Cartwright my true identity," he said harshly.

Hugh Lucas stared. "I doubt if you have the brass to do that, Slade." He pivoted stiffly and stalked away.

Buck Barker beckoned Hugh Lucas into the covert back of a wagon. "What did he say?" Barker grinned.

"Took it like the yellow coward he is. A man with any real guts would have challenged me."

"That's because he knew yore gun was carryin' real powder an' lead," Barker smirked. "But watch yoreself, Lucas. Yuh wouldn't want to be found dead some mornin', I reckon? Not if that skunk was left alive to carry that girl off'n her feet."

Lucas looked at him grimly. "If anything like that happens to me, you'll know who to brand as my murderer, Barker."

Buck Barker shrugged. "I sure would if'n I was around. But I'm pushin' on up the trail tomorrow, hopin' to pick up some other caravan that's got sense enough to let me guide 'em by the easy trail."

Lucas was thoughtful. "I doubt if Slade would have the sand to try to rub me out," he ruminated. "But it's best to play safe. If I die, at least Maidie's father should be warned about the man. I'll write a letter tonight and give it to Cartwright—to be opened in case of my death."

JAY lay sleepless in his blankets for hours, his hands locked back of his head, staring up stonily into the blackness of the wagon top. He harked back to that day more than two years ago when he had stood at twenty paces from the hawk-faced, cold-eyed lawyer, Duke Secrist, in the rosy radiance of a Sierra dawn, with a dueling pistol in his hand.

That duel had been more than a mere personal encounter. It was the culmination of a year-long fight on the part of Jay and two score miners to hold the rich claims they had staked in Roaring Canyon. Organized claim-pumpers, with powerful political backing, had descended on Roaring Canyon, only to be repulsed in a bloody gun battle in which Jay had established himself as the leader of the defenders.

Legal attacks had followed, based on forged Spanish land grants and perjured testimony. The Roaring Canyon miners, led by Jay, had fought every action through an exhausting maze of cross-suits and injunctions, with bribed judges and crooked lawyers cropping up on every hand.

Duke Secrist, a brilliant speaker and unscrupulous opportunist, who had risen high in California politics through his fiery oratory and personal magnetism, had been the brains of the legal attack on the Roaring Canyon claims.

Secrist had the reputation of having slain three opponents in affairs of honor, but that had not shaken his political hold. He had been slated for the nomination and almost certain election to Congress from the new and turbulent state of California. And it was a foregone conclusion that this would be but a step toward a seat in the United States Senate.

Men in the Mother Lode country had followed the Roaring Canyon claim war with keen interest, and eventually they came to refer to it as the Secrist-Slade fight. Duke Secrist and Jason Slade

stood out as strong men, locked in a conflict that came to be a personal feud between them, with Secrist's political future at stake.

Then one day on a Placerville street, they had met face to face. And Duke Secrist, claiming some verbal insult, had challenged Jay to a duel. The next dawn they had faced each other on the field of honor.

Cold sweat broke out on Jay's forehead as he remembered that scene. Secrist had taken every advantage, walking off the line as they paced off the steps, turning to fire a fraction before the count was completed. Jay had wheeled to find himself gazing into Secrist's leveled pistol. His own reaction had been instinctive, as he had jerked his gun up.

He had heard the empty snap of Secrist's gun, but too late to stay the hair trigger of his own weapon. His bullet went true. Duke Secrist had staggered back, then pitched on his face, dead.

Secrist's pistol had not been loaded! It was soon whispered around the mining camps that one of Secrist's seconds had been bribed by Jay. The second had dropped mysteriously out of sight after the duel, and was never found.

A revulsion swept the gold camps. Even Jay's acquittal by an unprejudiced court in Sacramento, went unheeded. Jay was branded as a coward and a murderer. Mobs began to follow him whenever he appeared in the gold camps, shouting lynch threats. Hs name became synonymous with disgrace.

The actions against the Roaring Canyon miners were rushed through crooked courts on the tidal wave of sentiment, and the claim-jumpers took over the rich gravel bars. Even the miners Jay had led, now ruined and disillusioned, turned against him.

Jay had faced it out without flinching until the day that his brawny, mature partner, Big Bill Stanton, frenzied by his losses, had denounced him. That same night Jay had burned the tintype picture of a girl that he had always carried in his pocket.

The picture was that of Big Bill Stanton's daughter. Big Bill had talked so much about his "little blue-eyed Cleo gal back in Ohio," that Jay had felt that he knew her personally, and had fallen in love with her—fallen in love with a picture and a fond father's description. He had built dreams of the day when he would go back to Ohio with Big Bill Stanton, and win this girl.

Jay had quit the mining camps that night, riding away penniless, friendless, alone. And he had abandoned the name of Jason Slade at the same time.

For months Jay had tried vainly to trace the man who had acted as Duke Secrist's second in that duel. When it was too late, he realized that Secrist had been sacrificed by his own backers. The crooked land agents behind the claim-jumping war had been cunning enough to know that if they disgraced Jay, their fight was won.

Secrist's own second, no doubt, had drawn the powder from the dueling pistol, and then had vanished. Jay had not caught more than a glimpse of the man's face as he stood there in the dawn light under the pines, muffled in a greatcoat. And nobody else had seemed to know anything about the man, or why he had acted for Secrist.

Jay was still awake and thinking, when the call to turn out rang through the wagon camp. Dawn was etching out the sullen ramparts of the Wasatch range far to the east, as he stepped down from his wagon.

Then a man began shouting wildly at the far end of the camp. And a woman's terrified scream joined in.

Jay reached the scene at a run. He stopped, staring in horror. The body of Hugh Lucas lay face down partly beneath

a wagon. A dark smear of dried blood stained the back of his canvas coat. A knife thrust had pierced his heart. Hugh Lucas had been dead for hours!

JAY knelt beside the body. "Keep the women away," he ordered.

Behind him Buck Barker's growling voice lifted. "It couldn't ha' been an Injun. No Piute or Digger could have snuk into camp with a double guard on duty last night. This pore devil was murdered by somebody right here amongst this outfit!"

"You're loco," Jay snapped. "Who'd want to murder Lucas?"

A girl's stricken scream ran piercingly over the camp. The news of Hugh Lucas' death had reached Maidie Cartwright. Jay saw her mother rushing to comfort her. And her father came hurrying up, waxen-faced and shaking. Willis Cartwright drew a trembling hand across his eyes after he looked at Lucas' body.

"Hugh must have had a premonition," he said hoarsely. "Only last night he gave me a letter to be opened in case of his death by violence."

"Letter?" Buck Barker boomed. "Where is it? Let's see what it says. This here lad was knifed by some night-crawlin' skunk. I ain't believin' thet no Injun done it."

Cartwright hurried to his wagon. Jay spread a tarp over Hugh Lucas' still form, and stood back, waiting. An uneasy silence held the wagon men. Eyes shifted around with dismay, and a deep tension gripped the group.

They watched Willis Cartwright rip open an envelope and scan, with moving lips, the paper that he unfolded. A terrible rage leaped into Cartwright's lined face. His blazing eyes lifted, and then he leveled a long, shaking finger at Jay.

"There's the man!" he shouted with the voice of doom. "There's the murderer! A dead man's word arises to brand him. This scoundrel is not Jay Rush. He is Jason Slade, the infamous slayer of Duke Secrist. And now he has murdered Hugh Lucas in an attempt to avoid exposure. For Hugh had learned this monster's real identity. Here are Hugh's own words: 'And if I should die by violence, it would be well to look to this Jason Slade as the one responsible.'"

Again Maidie Cartwright's frenzied scream sounded. She came bursting through the circle, her dark eyes burning out from an ashen face.

"You—you fiend!" she screamed. "To think that we've had a man like you in our midst! You've murdered the man I love!"

And she threw herself frenziedly on the tarp-covered form of Hugh Lucas, racked by hysterical grief.

"Git a hang rope," Buck Barker bellowed. "We'll see that Jason Slade don't never spill no more blood. String him up—"

Jay had tested the unreasonable temper of lynch mobs in the past; he knew the futility of argument. He stepped forward, swung a fist into Buck Barker's thick face. As the buckskin-clad man reeled back, Jay turned and ducked under a wagon.

A hammer-headed roan horse, owned by one of the wagon men, who had just come in from wrangling the loose saddle stock, stood ground-tied a dozen strides away. Jay had pulled his ball pistol instinctively, and a black rage tore at him, but he restrained the impulse to fire back at the howling mob that was bursting among the wagons in pursuit.

He hit the saddle, and wheeled the roan around in a startled leap. He fired a warning shot over the heads of the crowd. Then he swung into top stride as the first of the pursuers swarmed into the clear.

"Stop that man!" Willis Cartwright screeched. "Shoot him down!"

But few of the wagon men had thought to seize up their guns when the discovery of Hugh Lucas' murder had startled the camp. The three or four men who were armed snapped excited, hurried shots at Jay, who had canted his body, Indian-fashion, to the offside of his horse.

Jay heard the harsh singing of the slugs, saw spurts leap up in the earth under the flying hoofs of his mount. He straightened and looked back. Buck Barker was kneeling, with a rifle at his shoulder. Jay saw the spurt of fire, and felt a tearing, agonizing blow on his shoulder. He reeled, hung on desperately. Then an intervening swell protected him from the guns.

Blood drenched his sleeve, and for minutes he could only cling to the saddle, dazed and blind. Then the first shock of the wound faded somewhat. Looking back, as the roan breasted another swell, he could see the ant-like confusion at the wagon camp as men tried to catch up saddle mounts.

The pursuit was belated and half-hearted. The roan that destiny had placed in Jay's possession was the best saddle mount with the caravan, and it steadily drew away from the half dozen riders who finally appeared far behind.

Folded hills closed around Jay. After half an hour, emerging on a bald ridge, he counted the six pursuers trotting dejectedly back toward the wagons, which now were mere dots in the sage plain miles to the north.

CHAPTER THREE

Captive Girl

JAY was in agony from his wound, but the agony in his mind was even greater. Again he was unjustly accused of murder.

He dismounted, and contrived a bandage from his doeskin hunting shirt. He was barely able to drag himself back into the saddle again. Feverish thirst began to add to his torment as he rode slowly southward. He turned toward higher mountains, whose snow-tipped rims promised running water in the lower reaches.

Hours before the roan began the ascent of the mountains, Jay had lost all track of time and distance. He kept sagging over the saddlehorn. At last he toppled limply to the ground, and lay there in a stupor.

Twilight was settling when he sluggishly revived, to discover that his horse had wandered away. Numbed with cold, he instinctively began moving ahead, working blindly, feverishly along the rough mountainside, seeking water. It was midnight when he reeled down a canyonside into black depths from which came the droning of a stream.

He was more dead than alive when at last he dipped his hot lips in icy water. Sanity slowly returned then, and with it a mighty exhaustion. He dragged himself between two boulders, which sheltered him from the chill wind, and fell into a torpid slumber.

Why he did not freeze, he never knew. Daylight awakened him to the painful realization that he was still alive. His shoulder shot wrenching torment through his body at every move, but he discovered now that the rifle slug had scored only a deep flesh wound along the muscles of his upper arm and shoulder. It was an ugly wound, but no bones had been touched by the bullet.

Then his head lifted. The tang of woodsmoke hung faintly in the canyon. And now he discovered a horse trail, beaten by unshod hoofs, that showed much recent use. It followed the opposite margin of the swift-running mountain stream.

There were humans up the canyon. The chances were that it was a Piute or Digger village. Or it might be a trapper's camp. Jay began working his way up the canyon. If they were trappers he would find a

welcome. If they were Indians. . . . He shrugged. Even death at the hands of the Indians might be preferable to slow starvation in the mountains.

He toiled up a steep ascent, around a thundering rapids, and emerged abruptly into a thick grove of quaking aspens, fringing the margin of a lake-like widening in the stream.

Through the aspens he could see, scattered in an open flat beyond, a village of twenty ragged Piute and Digger lodges and mud huts. Set apart from the Indian abodes, was a straggling line of half-dugouts with rock and mud tops. White men's houses! And he glimpsed buckskin-clad white men mingling with the greasy tribesmen.

He sank down suddenly in the thick marsh grass at the margin of the stream. Hardly a rod from where he lay, a white girl stepped into view on the bank at the point where the stream began to seethe and narrow as it gathered itself to plunge over the brink of the booming rapids below.

Jay saw her face, pale as death, set in a marble-like fixity. For an instant he felt that he was the victim of an hallucination. The face of this blue-eyed, firm-bosomed girl with the wind-blown, wheat-gold hair, was the same face that had looked so sweetly out at him from that tintype picture that Big Bill Stanton had given him back at Roaring Canyon.

It was the face of Cleo Stanton, whose picture Jay had fallen in love with. He had never seen Big Bill Stanton's daughter in the flesh, but as he looked at this girl in this fantastic spot, there was no doubt in his mind. And all those old dreams he had built in the days before that duel with Duke Secrist, flashed wistfully across his mind.

He saw her lips moving, and heard the murmur of a broken-hearted prayer as she stared down with fascination into the rapids.

This was not a dream! Cleo Stanton was real. And in a flash Jay realized that she meant to throw herself into the stream, and allow it to sweep her to death in the rapids. She had come here to end her life!

JAY came to his feet. With a desperate leap, he snatched her back from the stream's edge as she poised to hurl herself to her doom. She turned upon him madly, seeking to tear away, but he wrapped his arms around her, pinning her against him.

Suddenly she went limp. "Please let me die," she breathed faintly. "Have mercy on me. Don't take me back to—to that."

Her despairing eyes turned up to him. Then her expression changed. A faint hope flashed into her face.

"Who are you?" she gasped. "Are you one of them—one of Buck Barker's men?"

"Buck Barker?" Jay repeated, amazed. "What has Barker to do with you? What settlement is this? Who are these white men hobnobbin' with the Diggers?"

"You mean you're not—not one of them?" she panted.

"I stumbled into this place by chance," he told her gently. "I'm your friend. You were going to kill yourself. Why?"

Hope had grown to a consuming, wild blaze in her sea-blue eyes. "Miracles like this can't happen," she choked. "But it has—it has." Then she cast a quick, apprehensive glance back toward the village. "They'll miss me soon and begin hunting for me," she whispered hurriedly. "They're holding me a prisoner here. They ambushed our wagon train a week ago, massacred my father, Big Bill Stanton, and every other man in the train. I was the only one they allowed to live. And I've been praying for death ever since. They're white renegades, and they have these awful Indians to help them."

"They've hurt you?" Jay demanded.

"Not yet. I'm to be Buck Barker's wife when Barker returns. It was that awful beast who guided us into ambush. He met our caravan on the Salt Lake trail and talked us into trying a new route by way of Santa Fé. We headed south. There is no such trail to Santa Fé from here. Barker only led us into the ambush his renegades had set. They attacked us at dawn. We didn't have a chance."

She stopped, looking at Jay with a gasp of dismay. "You're hurt! You've been wounded. Let me—"

She was moving to touch the rude bandage. Then her head lifted like a startled fawn. She pushed him down into the high grass.

"Here comes one of them, hunting me," she breathed. "Hide! I'll be back. I promise it. I'll bring food and clean bandages! Don't let them see you. It means death."

She turned swiftly away as a man's harsh voice bellowed a profane demand. "Here I am," Jay heard her answer defiantly. "Can't I have a minute's peace? I'm sick of the sight of you ugly scoundrels. I only wanted to be alone."

The man laughed jeeringly. "You better git used to us, little gal," he sneered. "You're goin' to be with us fer some time to come. Don't go wanderin' off outa sight or I'll have to lock you up ag'in. Buck would peel me alive if anythin' happened to you."

"I was just looking for a likely place to wash out my spare clothes," she answered. "You may enjoy living in filthy rags, but I don't. I'm going to bring a washing down to the stream right away."

Their voices faded away. Jay chanced a glimpse and saw the girl marching back into the renegade camp, with a grinning, snag-toothed ruffian at her heels.

JAY sank down. Grimly he reviewed the startling discovery he had made. He had heard rumors that renegade trail marauders infested the Salt Lake Valley, preying on Gentiles and Mormons alike. He wondered if it had been in that connection that the name of Buck Barker had been mentioned. The elusive belief that he had seen or heard of the man in the past still persisted.

And now he began to understand why Hugh Lucas had been murdered. There was no doubt in Jay's mind that Barker was the one who had driven that knife into Lucas' heart. The renegade had chosen a clever way of discrediting Jay in the eyes of the wagon company. The chances were that Barker, by this time, had prevailed on them to try his nonexistent route to Santa Fé—a route that would lead to ambush and massacre.

Soon Jay saw the girl returning, carrying a bundle of garments in her arms. She moved to the margin of the stream, within talking distance, but she did not look at him as she began rinsing out the clothes.

"Stay down," she warned. "They may be watching me. I tried to escape once, and it wasn't until yesterday that they gave me the freedom of the camp. At night they lock me in one of those dugouts. If you could get to Salt Lake City, you might bring the Mormons to wipe out this nest of snakes. They corral some of their horses every night just above the village. You could probably get a mount there, and—"

"Which shack will you be in?" he asked.

She shot a quick glance at him. "Don't think about me," she said bravely. "I'm safe enough until Buck Barker gets back. None of them dare offend him."

"Do they post a guard over your shack?" Jay persisted.

"One," she admitted reluctantly. "But don't—"

"Be ready—tonight," Jay said. "I'm not leaving you here, Cleo."

She stared at him. "You know my name?" she gasped.

"Yes. Back in Roaring Canyon, I was your father's partner—once. He gave me your picture." Jay steeled himself. Never again, he resolved, would he use any identity but his own. "My name is Jason Slade," he added stonily. "I imagine you've heard it."

She dropped the garment she had been rinsing. "Jason Slade!" she breathed. "You? Why, dad believed you were dead! I came to California by ship soon after you had dropped out of sight. Dad told me all about you, regretting to his dying day that he had turned against you."

A warming tide swept through Jay. "Big Bill Stanton came to believe in me?" he questioned wonderingly.

"Yes." Her eyes were shining. "The loss of his claim crazed him, and at first he blamed you. But he never really believed you were guilty of that thing. And if only he had lived, he would know the whole truth, as I know it now. I can prove your innocence to the world, Jason Slade."

"What do you mean?" He looked at her sharply.

"Just that. Here, in this renegade camp, I learned the truth about the Secrist-Slade duel. It was Buck Barker who acted as Duke Secrist's second that day. Barker drew the load from that pistol. The syndicate backing the claim-jumping fight bribed him to do it. They sacrificed Duke Secrist, who had grown too powerful politically to suit them. And they disgraced you at the same time, in order to turn sentiment against the Roaring Canyon miners."

Jay's face was a battleground of seething emotions. "You're right," he grated. "I couldn't place Barker until now. I glimpsed his face vaguely the morning of the duel. But how did you learn all this."

"Barker recognized my father after—after the massacre," she said sadly. "Knowing I was Big Bill's daughter, he boasted to me about the Roaring Canyon claim war, and what he had done. He told it all. He was proud of his part in it."

She arose. "I must go now. I've brought food—jerky and penole. And here's a blanket for you. Please don't worry about me. Go for help. Save yourself. If they discover you here, you'll die—horribly. They may turn you over to the Indians."

"I'll never leave here alive without you, Cleo," Jay told her. "Listen to me. I fell in love with you when I had only your picture to look at. Is there—is there any other man, Cleo Stanton? Is your heart free?"

Color rushed up her smooth cheeks, and her shapely young breast tightened. She stared at him wildly. "There's—there's no one else," she choked.

Then she fled, carrying her damp armload of garments back to the renegade rendezvous. Jay marked the shack that she entered.

He worked his way into a deep thicket of willows. The penole, soaked in water from the stream, and the jerky strengthened him. In the blanket she had given him were strips of clean white cotton that she had torn from some undergarment. He cleansed, bathed and bandaged his wound. The food proved to be an amazing restorative. His left arm was stiff and painful, and the wound throbbed steadily. But it showed no dangerous inflammation. It would heal swiftly, he believed.

He glimpsed Cleo Stanton twice during the long day; but, wisely, she did not come down to the stream again. Jay estimated that there were about a dozen white renegades and more than two score Indian braves in the rendezvous. He seethed at the thought of white men allying themselves with the cowardly desert tribes, who would never fight unless the odds were heavily in their favor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wagon Train Ambush

PURPLE twilight flooded the canyon notches. Then came the swift darkness of the high country. The night was clear and crisply cold, the sky luminous with stars.

There would be a moon later. Jay left his covert, circled the village, where cookfires cast flickering shadows, and located a rude corral of notched cedar poles, built against the blank wall of a cliff, into which the renegades had turned their cavvy for the night.

He discovered saddles and headstalls perched on the low branches of the cedars around. He helped himself to two hulls and a braided rawhide catch rope. Soon he had two shaggy horses rigged. A cold wind had sprung up, moaning through the timber; it wiped out any sounds he made at the corral.

He led the animals nearer the village, tethered them in the shadows of the cedars. Then he moved out across the open flat on hands and knees. When he neared the squatty outline of the low-roofed shacks, he crept along on his stomach.

The Indians and renegades had turned in for the night. The cookfires were dying, sending red sparks skittering along the wind. Only in front of the rock-walled hovel that he had marked as Cleo's quarters, was there a fresh fire blazing.

Facing Jay, a drowsy, coppery half-breed sat on guard, huddled in a blanket, with a rifle near at hand. The renegade was helping himself now and then to an odorous, mescal-made liquor from a goat-skin waterbag.

Jay lay flat in the shadows, waiting, hoping the guard would arise and come within his reach. But time passed, and he saw the yellow pallor to the east that proclaimed the coming of the moon.

His hand touched a small loose rock. He lifted it, tossed it high over the guard's head, and then came to hands and toes, poised like a sprinter. The stone struck with a sharp thud behind the guard, and the fellow leaped to his feet, spinning around.

Jay crossed the half dozen yards like a diving falcon. The man heard him, at the last instant, and whirled with a startled grunt. That sound broke off as Jay's hands clenched on his throat. The rifle dribbled from the man's grasp.

As they crashed to the ground, the renegade wriggled like a snake, managing to jerk his knife from his belt. Jay maintained his grip on the man's windpipe with one hand. And with the other, he caught the knife-arm. He twisted the wrist savagely, and turned the hilt of the knife against his own chest.

Clamped together in desperate combat, the renegade's own struggles brought his doom. Jay was amazed as the man went suddenly limp and quivering. Then he discovered that the knife, thin-bladed, keen-pointed, had been driven deep into the renegade's chest. And the man's own brown fingers were still clenched around the hilt.

Fighting to subdue his labored breathing, Jay dragged the dead renegade into the shadows behind the shack. The faint sound of the struggle had passed unnoticed in the booming windstorm.

He moved to the rude, split-log door of the shack, which was secured on the outside by two stout bars.

As he pressed close to it, Cleo breathed, "Jason?"

"Yes," he murmured.

Then he uttered a low warning for silence. The wind had brought the rattle of galloping hoofs. Jay retreated hastily around the corner of the dugout, an instant before a rider swept into the sleeping village. It was Buck Barker!

"Roll out, damn you!" Barker bellowed. "Shake a leg!"

THE camp came alive. White men and Indians came pouring out to surround Buck Barker. Sagebrush was piled on the fires to brighten the scene. Buck Barker cursed them for failing to have a guard over the camp.

"Saddle up," he snarled. "There's meat in the pot for us ag'in. I've got another wagon train ready. They're waitin' like bleatin' sheep down on the flats just out from the mouth of the canyon. Hunk, where are you? Come here, an' listen. You take charge of this end of it. I'll lead you down an' show you the wagon camp. Then I'm going back to the wagons, to make sure they don't get suspicious.

"You have the boys an' the Injuns spread out an' ready. If the sign is right, I'll give the owlhoot three times just when it's growin' light enough to shoot straight. Give me time enough to git clear before you close in. The last time you damned near caught me with your rush. I don't aim to stop one of the bullets of my own men. Don't bungle this, Hunk. There's yaller dust in them wagons tonight, enough to winter us in Santa Fé like gentlemen."

Barker slapped a hulking renegade on the back. "An' there's a purty young female down there, Hunk," he guffawed. "Ain't an ounce of savvy in her head, but I reckon she'll do for you."

Then Buck Barker came swaggering to the shack that held Cleo Stanton. He opened the door.

Jay heard his hoarse chuckle. "Still waitin' fer me, huh! An' lookin' purtier than ever. 'Twon't be long now 'til I come back fer keeps."

Barker turned away from the shack and barred the door. "Put somebody on guard here, Hunk," he thundered.

"Damn that lazy 'breed thet I left to keep watch," the renegade lieutenant complained. "Sancho, where are yuh? Sancho! . . . No answer, damn his soul. He's likely layin' out in the tules dead drunk. I'll bastinado him when I git my hands on him."

Jay stayed motionless in the darkness as renegades and Indians armed themselves, saddled up, and rode away. There had been some angry dispute about missing saddles, but they were laughing and jubilant as they headed down the canyon to pillage and kill.

A frowsy-looking renegade had been left to take the place of the missing Sancho. He yawned and walked near the corner of the shack where Jay crouched. Jay hit him on the jaw, hit him again before he fell, and then bound and gagged him with the hide catch-rope.

A moment later he was in the shack, facing the blue-eyed girl. She placed her hands in his, and, sweetly, unquestioningly, she moved closer and kissed him. She clung to his arm as they slipped outside and made their way to the horses.

They rode away from the rendezvous, which now was occupied by only a few squaws, and Jay led the way up a perilous ascent to the canyon rim. From there they descended into another defile, down which they turned toward where the rising moon showed the wide valley.

At midnight they emerged from the canyon mouth. No more than half a dozen miles south of them, set on the open benches against the dark bulk of the mountain slant, a dot of fire glimmered faintly, and Jay made out the glint of wagon sheets in the moonlight.

Cleo's hand stole into his as they headed toward the trail camp. Jay told her about Hugh Lucas' death.

"They still think I'm guilty," he remarked grimly.

"They'll soon know the truth," she said with sudden passion. "I'll make them believe. I'll kill anyone who tries to harm you—Jason Slade!"

"That name," he said, "is worth something when you say it."

THE single man on stock guard arose from a nap with a gasp of alarm as Jay and Cleo rode up.

"Who comes there?" he challenged.

"Jason Slade," Jay rasped curtly. "Put down that gun, Pete. I'm back. This girl with me is a white woman."

They rode past the startled guard and into the wagon circle. One man reared up instantly from a blanket-bed near the red embers of the central fire. It was Buck Barker, who had just crept back from his trip to the rendezvous, undiscovered by the sleepy stock guard. Barker had talked Willis Cartwright into reducing the night guard, scoffing at the thought of danger on this route that he guided.

When Barker recognized the tawny-haired girl, he suddenly leaped back, reaching for his muzzle-loading rifle. With a snarling laugh, Jay was upon him in a diving plunge from the saddle. He knocked the rifle away, and his fist smashed into Barker's heavy face.

"The trap is set, Barker," Jay gritted. "But it's a trap for your scalpers instead of these people."

Barker came at him like a madman, clawing for his knife. Jay smashed him with a sledge-hammer punch, and the man went down. Only sheer desperation and the knowledge that he faced his doom goaded Barker back on his feet. Again Jay measured him coldly and struck. And this time Barker did not arise.

The fight had aroused the camp. Half-clad men came swarming to surround them. "It's Slade!" someone shouted.

Willis Cartwright confronted Jay. He glanced, puzzled at Cleo, who stood straight and proud at Jay's side.

"Seize this man," Cartwright thundered with a dramatic gesture. "Don't stand there staring, men. He's the murderer of—"

Cleo stepped in front of Jay, her blue eyes glazing. "Murderer of nobody," she snapped impatiently. "Jason Slade came here to save your foolish lives. You're in a trap, the same trap that Buck Barker led my father and more than twenty men into only a week ago. It was Buck Barker who murdered Hugh Lucas."

She turned to where Buck Barker was sitting up, dazed and bleeding. "You did it, didn't you, Barker?" she said grimly. "You killed Hugh Lucas, and put the blame on Jason Slade, in order to discredit him and bring these people to your own purpose. And two years ago you plotted the death of Duke Secrist in order to disgrace this same brave man."

She faced the wagon people, and with words that seared, she told the truth. There were three or four in the company who had known Cleo and her father in the mining camps, and they came forward now and made themselves known. Doubt changed to conviction. A stalwart bull-whacker suddenly moved to Jay, extending his hand.

"We was fools, Slade," he mumbled. "Can yuh forget?"

Maidie Cartwright came pushing through the circle, and rushed to Jay's side. "Is it true we're in an ambush?" she panted. "I don't want to die. I can't stand bloodshed and fighting. Get me away from here, Jay. Take me—"

Jay turned his back on her. She was craven; her only thought was for her own safety. And she had used Jay as a goad to spark Hugh Lucas' jealousy. Indirectly, she had been responsible for Lucas' death.

Jay raised his arms for silence. "You're in an ambush," he said. "And you can all turn tail like cowards and pull out You have two hours in which to sneak away before dawn comes. But that would leave these renegades alive and able to fall upon some other wagon train. This is your chance to wipe them out. We can turn the tables on them. Are you men —or are you yellow-livered cowards? Will you fight—or will you run?"

"We'll fight," the big bullwhacker roared. "I knew Big Bill Stanton an' his daughter back in Placerville. I'm fer wipin' out the skunks that slaughtered him an' his outfit."

A rumble of grim agreement arose.

Jay smiled. "Here's what we'll do," he told them. "Let every man and every woman do their part. We'll . . . "

JAY looked around, nodded with satisfaction. "All ready," he called softly, and clambered into a wagon.

The wagon camp in the dim, faint light of dawn looked asleep. A dying fire flickered in the circle. Under a few wagons were blanketed forms that looked like sleeping men.

Crouching in the depths of the big, hooded Pittsburgh wagon that Jay mounted, were Cleo and two wagon men. And Buck Barker, bound and gagged, lay on the floor.

Boxes and trunks had been piled high against the outer sides of the wagon, as an added protection against bullets, and loopholes had been cut all along the lower edge of the canvas.

Jay had seen to it that all of the ten wagons were similarly fortified and ready.

He made a gesture, and a bow-legged Missouri man cupped his hands and sent a quavering owlhoot through the dawn.

There was a vast silence. Then the gray dawn seemed to stir and erupt with sound. A rumble of hoofs rolled down from the brush-flanked slants just to the west of the encampment. And the blood-curdling warwhoop of Indians pierced the frosty air, mingling with the hoarse vocal efforts of oncoming white renegades.

The charging line took form in the dim grayness, sweeping down upon the wagons like a hurricane. And their guns began to flame! The renegades were confident of an easy victory over the surprised camp.

"Now!" Jay shouted. "Fire!"

A ring of gun-flame leaped out from the wagons, sending forth a solid, stunning crash. The yells of the oncoming renegades suddenly changed to screams of dismay and fear.

Jay saw ponies spilling end over end, and glimpsed riders toppling. He laid aside the muzzle-loader, picked up the ball pistols that lay near at hand. Cleo seized the rifle and began ramming a fresh charge home.

The sleet of death from the wagon train arose again, as the sidearms were brought into play. Fifty white men and Indians had charged confidently out of the dawn . . . Now, within seconds, half of them had been blotted out.

Mad with fear, the survivors turned to flee. Bullets continued to harry them as they swung their horses. A scant score of them lashed their mounts back toward the hills from which they had come. Nearly all of them were Indians. Around the wagon train, they left—dead, dying or wounded—all but two of the white renegades who, with Buck Barker, had harried the California Trail.

Jay laid aside his smoking pistol. Cleo Stanton stood beside him. And in the growing light of dawn, he saw the bright promise in her eyes. His arm went around her slim waist. He drew her close.

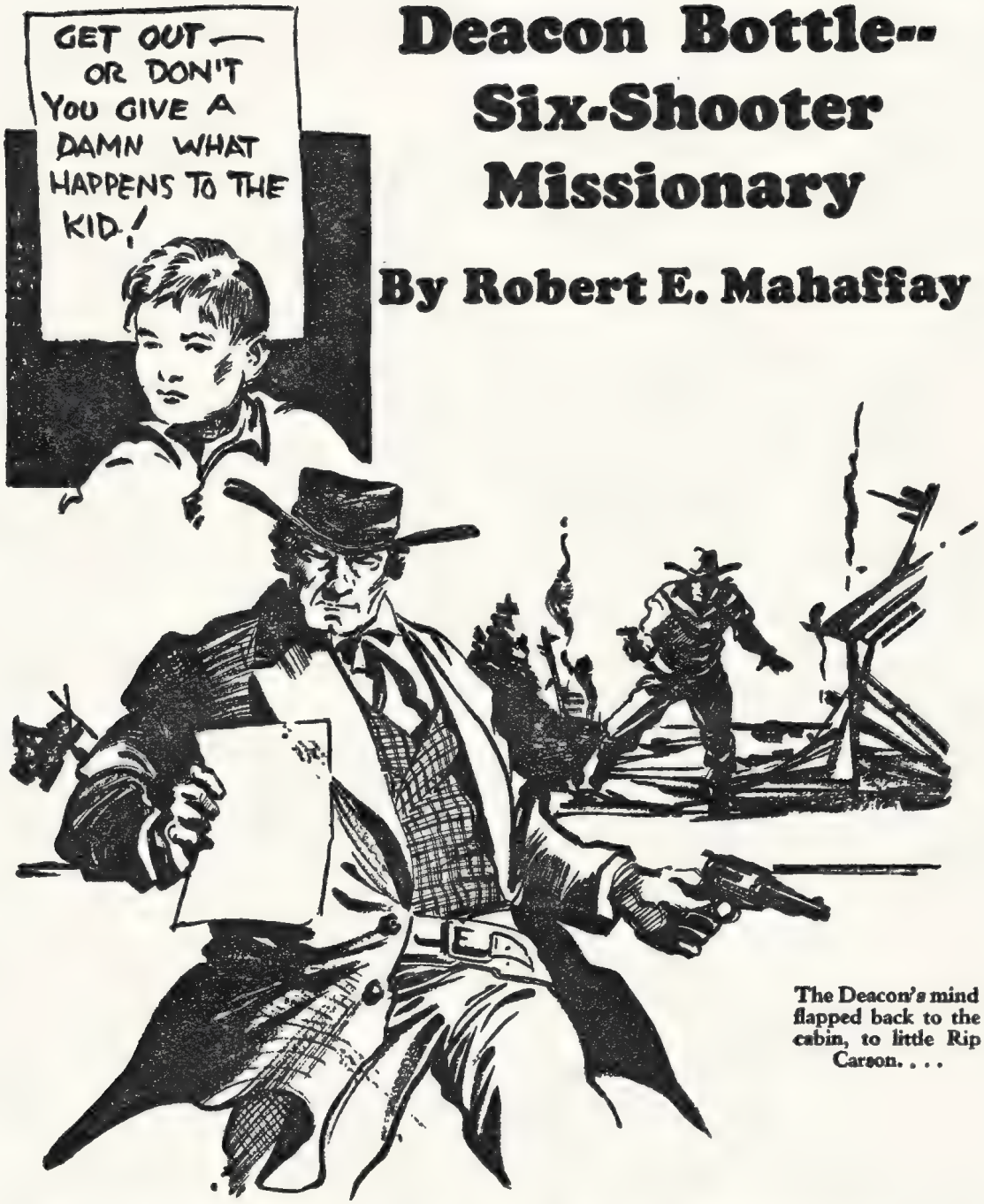
They moved away from the wagon train, and the smell of battle that hung over it. They did not see the grim group of men who lifted Buck Barker on a horse and led him to a gaunt tree in a nearby draw. Not until later did they learn that Buck Barker, before he died, made a full confession of his part in the death of Duke Secrist and admitted that he was the slayer of Hugh Lucas.

For Jason Slade and Cleo Stanton, as they stood together, far from the wagons, watching the dawn turn golden, the past was meaningless. It did not matter. They had only the future to look forward to.

THE END

Deacon Bottle--Six-Shooter Missionary

By Robert E. Mahaffay



The Deacon's mind flapped back to the cabin, to little Rip Carson. . . .

When the Deacon laid up his guns for the good of the town he loved, he learned that even his silver-mounted six-shooters could give a better preachment than all the oratory he'd ever made. . . . Though his thanks for saving his neighbors would be lonely bitter exile!

LIGHT from the fireplace in the little cabin danced over Deacon Bottle's plump worried face. He said thickly, "Mel, I'm not a gunhawk any more."

Mel Haycort, oldest and best friend of the Deacon, brought his stare up from the table in front of him and looked hard at the Deacon. "Deacon, they shot Starling in the back."

"Damn it, Mel!" Even in the firelight the Deacon's smooth cheeks were pale. "There's the law to handle that. My guns are stowed away—for good!"

"Things have changed since you pulled out of Latigo." Haycort's long-chinned jaw snapped on the words.

The Deacon took a restless pace or two and answered helplessly, "If Enoch was dead, it'd maybe be different. But you said he was goin' to pull through."

"Doc Sykes says he's rattlin' death's door-knob."

Deacon Bottle's blue eyes were no longer mild as they swept over the rough log walls. It was as if his gaze was trying to push through into the high North Hills. He had had his reason for coming here. He had meant it to be a break in his life, a barrier shutting off the old days. The old Deacon Bottle—gunman extraordinary, prodigal drinker, fraudulent man-of-God—was to have been buried in these hills.

A desperate note was his voice. "There's the kid to think of, Mel."

He looked toward the door as he spoke. It was for the boy's sake he had come here. He had meant to give little Rip Carson, whom he had adopted out of a background of violence and death, a new start. He hadn't wanted the boy to understand about his past, about his juggling with the law, about his dangerous skill with a six-shooter.

"I know that." The thin lips in Haycort's gaunt face softened. "If things hadn't been as bad as they are, I wouldn't have come. But Enoch Starling is my friend, an' he's yours."

That was the bitter part of it. In the old days, when the Deacon had been more of an outlaw than an honest man, Sheriff Enoch Starling had trusted him as a friend. There had been a sure, strong bond between the two of them. Much that the law was powerless to do the Deacon had done, at the risk of his own neck. In return, Starling had winked the Deacon's lesser violations of the statutes. And more than once, when the pinch was dangerous, it was Starling who had stood between Deacon Bottle and the hang-rope.

Haycort went on relentlessly. "You know what this law job means to Enoch. He'd put a bullet through his own head if he thought he'd failed at it."

Deacon Bottle shook his head. "I don't get what you're drivin' at."

"Well, he's botched the job, if you want to look at it that way. An' we've got to keep him from findin' it out."

"You're crazy, Mel. He's been sheriff for a hell of a long time. Been a damned square one, too!"

Haycort didn't reply to that directly. "Latigo's a tough town," he said. "There's plenty of tough gents in it. Well, with you gone, it's blown up. You did more good than the law. It wasn't Starling the hard-cases were afraid of. It was you—you an' your guns."

DEACON BOTTLE'S glance lifted to the two silver-mounted weapons which had helped to make him famous. They were hanging in their holsters now from a nail in the wall. He had sworn to himself, for Rip Carson's sake, never to use them again. But—this was different. The Deacon swore softly.

Haycort said, "Somebody's got to clean up Latigo for Starling. He'll try, if he gets on his feet again, an' they'll kill him. There's only one man can do it, Deacon."

Deacon Bottle nodded, his features tight. "I'll go, Mel." He pulled the heavy silver watch out of his checkered vest. "I reckon we better—"

There was the patter of feet on the packed dirt outside. The door swung open. A little water sloshed out of the bucket the boy carried. The ragged, over-size coat hung loosely from his thin shoulders; his right arm was soaking wet.

"Gosh, Deacon," he burst out, "I blamed near got myself a trout." His round, hazel eyes were beaming with the exuberance of a ten-year-old who has encountered adventure. Excitedly he brushed at the blond curls tumbling about his pale forehead.

The Deacon grunted. "What with? The bucket?"

Happy scorn crinkled Rip Carson's eyes. "Gee, no! I got down on the ledge an' shined the lantern in that pool by the big rock. There was old Mr. Trout squattin' on his haunches, grinnin' at me. I made a grab for him, but the old devil was so doggoned slippery he got loose. Bet it'll be a good long time 'fore he does his snoozin' right in close like that again."

The Deacon was shrugging into his patched black frock coat, buckling on his gun belts. "How'd you like a line an' some hooks, so you could really catch 'em?"

"We'd have trout every mornin'," the boy promised eagerly.

"I'll get some for you." And then the Deacon added carefully, "Think you can hold the fort all by yourself for a day or so?"

A flicker of uncertainty passed over the boy's face. "You goin' away somewheres, Deacon?"

"Down to Latigo, son. Got to go alone this time." Deacon Bottle was talking rapidly, trying not to let Rip discover the grimness that sheathed his thoughts. "One of us better stay an' keep an eye on things, see? That'll be a man's job for you to handle."

Rip's hazel eyes lighted up again. "You figure maybe there'll be trouble?" he growled importantly.

Quick to snatch at the chance to make a game of it, the Deacon frowned. "Can't ever tell. I won't be worryin', though—with you here."

Rip grinned. "Injuns, maybe," he suggested. "I'll sure keep my eyes peeled, Deacon."

"Hop off to bed now."

A little later the Deacon went into the bedroom, accepted Rip's enthusiastic bear-hug. He blew out the lamp and stood there for a moment in the dark. He could hear the boy's soft breathing, and he realized with a harsh ache how much he had come to love him. And Rip trusted him. He had promised the lad a home, sympathy and friendship. He was risking those things now. Before him was the blunt fact that he might not be returning from Latigo.

He went out of the room quickly. "All right, Mel."

Four hours of hard riding separated them from Latigo. Deacon Bottle, veteran of the multitude of tricks the broken North Hills could play upon a night rider, led the way on his big white-stockinged bay. For a time, as the moon was not yet up, all his instincts and attention were absorbed in picking out the trail. Their hoof beats rolled away to echo hollowly after them. The night was a close-hanging shroud of uncertainty and vague threat.

When the yellow disk of the moon crawled from behind a timbered ridge, the Deacon grunted his relief, put the bay to a faster pace. He began to talk, pounding questions like blows of a fist.

"Who 'bushed Starling "

Mel Haycort was a thin black shape clattering behind him. "Nobody knows. Not even Enoch."

"Any kind of a lead at all?"

"Just guesswork. But if Kurt Borst didn't do it himself it was him rigged the job."

"Don't know him."

"Ain't likely you would, Deacon. He hit Latigo after you left. Brought in a slug of gamblin' money, aimin' to rod the town. Whipped the toughs into line behind him. My hunch is, Deacon, that he took your leavin' as a come-on signal."

THEY were turning down the lip of a canyon, following along it and sliding down a shale-littered break in the wall. Deacon Bottle snapped, "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"I'm not tellin' you what I think. I'm tellin' you what the talk was. When you pulled out with the kid, folks figured that somethin' had happened to run the guts out of you. You dropped a word or two in the Desert Eagle, remember, about bein' through with gun-handlin'."

Deacon Bottle swerved the bay from the mouth of the canyon, put him at a lope down a long avenue of shadowy pines. "I'd have been content to let it ride that way."

"Maybe. Anyhow, the wolves marched in, with Kurt Borst leadin' 'em. He's sunk plenty of dough in his gamblin' outfits. He's got Latigo runnin' wide open. Starling tried to stop it—an' couldn't. He was goin' to close Borst up when a sniper put a slug in his back from the top of a buildin'. He missed killin' Enoch by about inches."

"What does the town think about it?"

"They been stickin' with Enoch, thinkin' he'd clean the mess up for 'em."

The remainder of the ride they made in silence.

It was a little past midnight when they worked out of the last of the lower hills and rode across rolling sod hummocks toward the town. There were lights that the Deacon did not remember. Now, at midnight, the place was booming.

Deacon Bottle considered that with a certain grimness. During the past months he had purposely avoided Latigo, afraid that something would happen to separate him from little Rip Carson. Bitterness rode him as he reflected that the fact of his leaving had put Latigo into the jam which required his return.

The flimsy new buildings, he noted as they paced down the town's main street, were honkatonk dance halls and gambling establishments. The walks were thick with men he had never seen before. Unseen pianos hammered out cracked rhythms; laughter shrilled through oaths and harsh snatches of altercations; now and again the blatant snarl of a revolver rolled up into the night sky. Madness, it seemed, had settled upon Latigo; a roaring, rough-and-tumble demon of boisterousness was spurring the place from muzzle to hocks. And with it came the violence, the red tragedy that made it a blight for the decent, honest citizens.

Mel Haycort jerked his thumb toward a gaudily-painted structure on his right. It was two stories high, blazing with lights. "Kurt Borst's outfit," he grunted. "He owns most of the little joints, too."

Someone recognized the Deacon and called his name. A man, slouched by the bat-wings of the big saloon and gambling house, yelled derisively. That yell stiffened the Deacon's portly frame in the saddle. It was an ugly portent, and Haycort's blunt information drifted back to him. The toughs weren't afraid of him any more. They thought he had softened, lost his nerve.

He growled. "Where's Enoch? Let's get to him."

Mel Haycort looked over his shoulder, and his perpetually worried face was more gaunt than usual. "I hope Starling don't smell a rat when you hit him up for a deputy's badge. Maybe if he's groggy enough—"

The Deacon jerked his head. "Hell, he'd know in a minute what was up if I asked him for it straight-out. Wouldn't give it to me. I been thinkin' about that."

"Then how the devil—"

"Get him to think he's helpin' me out. You go in first. Tell him I've come in town on a bat. Tell him I'm drunker'n seven hundred dollars, an' can't take care of myself, an' that some of the hard cases are fixin' to have some fun with me—the kind of fun that leaves a man with busted

bones. Tell him that if I've got a deputy's badge they'll lay off me, knowin' that Enoch Starling won't stand for messing with one of his deputies."

Haycort forced a wry grin. "I'll make out that all you aim to do is sleep it off. If there's a blow-up it'll all be a surprise to me."

"I'd swore off whiskey," the Deacon declared, "but Starling has got to at least smell it. We'll stop at the Desert Eagle an' I'll sprinkle a little on my coat."

The Desert Eagle whiskey, it developed, was of such an unexpectedly fine grade that prison would have been too good for the man who wasted it. A few drops may have dribbled by accident onto the Deacon's vest, but he brushed them well into the cloth and they didn't show.

Better than a quart later he stated reluctantly to Haycort, "We better quit this, or it won't be an act. Come along."

Wizened little Doc Sykes, in his underwear and boots, cursed them both vigorously for breaking in upon a sick man at such an ungodly hour. But he let them in. And the brawny, mustached Enoch Starling, very pale, his voice no more than a whisper, summoned the strength for a few words on the evils of excess. But he swore the Deacon in.

"Get him to bed," he admonished Haycort weakly as the Deacon fumbled to pin the badge to his vest. "Get him to bed an' keep him there."

"I'll sure try," mumbled Haycort. And he led Deacon Bottle, stumbling and reeling, from the room.

Outside, Deacon Bottle gave a tug at the brim of his low-crowned black hat, flexed the muscles of his thick arms and wide shoulders. The Deacon was not a small man. A careless appraisal might interpret his girth as chiefly flabby and surplus weight, but such carelessness was rewarded with trouble—plenty of it.

He carefully examined his two silver-mounted sixguns, shoved them back into leather and pulled his coat closed. "On account of Starling," he directed, "we'll keep on bein' drunk. Let's get started."

He led the way, weaving ponderously but with his blue eyes sharp and narrow. It was late enough now so that most of the traffic was indoors. Lights, however, still shone with a yellow glare; the crisp rattle of chips sifted into the street along with booming, drunken argument.

At the door of Kurt Borst's Crystal Palace Deacon Bottle put his hand on Mel Haycort's shoulder. "You wait here, Mel. I'll have a little talk with Borst."

Haycort grinned. "Wait here? Are you crazy?"

The Deacon grinned too. "Maybe it won't be all talk, at that."

WITH Haycort at his shoulder, he pushed through and into the saloon. For the barest instant there flickered across his mind the picture of little Rip Carson, waiting for him at the cabin. . . .

But that was washed away under the hard press of the needs of the moment.

From one of the gambling tables to the center and left a man called out, "Damned if it ain't the Deacon!" and added a sneering taunt. The Deacon would have welcomed opposition, but this wasn't that; it was only indifferent scorn.

Deacon Bottle forged unsteadily toward the long bar on the right. He didn't need Haycort's muttered word to locate Kurt Borst. Coatless and silk-shirted, the gambler had turned his head slowly from conversation with one of the bartenders.

Studying the man from under lowered lids, Deacon Bottle caught the stamp of complete ruthlessness on his lumpy features. The stare from his frigid green eyes told the Deacon another thing. Kurt Borst's intuitions were razor-edged. Others might think the Deacon was drunk. Borst didn't.

Borst waited, the calculated set of his thin lips unchanged. When the Deacon

rolled ponderously to a halt beside him, Borst's voice came with a smooth sting. "Want to give one of your damn preachments, do you?"

The room heard and guffawed. Deacon Bottle grinned vacantly, awkwardly fumbled at the lapel of his coat so that the deputy's badge would show.

"Later, maybe, Borst. Right now I'm closin' up a lot of joints. Yours here is first. Get together any stuff you want to save. I want a padlock on it by daylight."

A hint of surprise came into Kurt Borst's green eyes, then it vanished in an icy, hostile stare. "Come around at daylight," he advised. "I'll feed that padlock to you."

Deacon Bottle sighed. "Thought you'd look at it that way. No sense in waitin' then, I reckon."

Weaving on his pillar-like legs, the Deacon staggered to the roulette table, picked up one of the croupier's rakes. He wandered back to the bar with it. Methodically he began to rake bottles off the shelves of the backbar. Glass splintered and crashed. The mingled smells of sweat and tobacco smoke and liquor-laden breath were overborne by a reeking wave of spilled whiskey.

Kurt Borst didn't move. "Throw this smart son out!" he snarled. "And mess him up some!"

A burly waiter dropped a loaded tray and came jumping. The Deacon spun around, leveled the rake like a rapier. The fellow ran into it with his teeth.

The waiter's howl was choked off as Deacon Bottle swung a left hook that jarred against his bony jaw. He sprawled back against two other waiters coming up from behind.

A raw-boned, bullet-headed stud dealer laid down his cards and growled, "I hope he's still on his feet by the time I get to him."

The Deacon was. The two bouncers had brushed by their companion. The smaller of them, a red-haired dynamite bundle with a knife scar across his forehead, lunged at the bar in a diving tackle. Deacon Bottle saw him coming, twisted away four inches. Red-head smashed into the oak facing of the bar, and as he floundered the Deacon ground his face into the floor with an ungentle boot.

The move, however, destroyed some of his balance, and the last of the trio, a hard case with pale eyes and a broken nose, got close enough to rip two savage blows to the Deacon's flushed face.

Taking that punishment, Deacon Bottle caught him by the belt and flung him with a jerking half-swing. Clawing smoky air, Pale-Eyes cartwheeled, cracked ribs as he slammed into a faro table. He struggled there, yelling, in a tangle of customers and smashed furniture.

The raw-boned dealer came out of the mess like a cat. He was grinning. His fists were flat-irons at the end of steel pistons. He danced in like a boxer, throwing iron-shod knuckles in a staggering barrage. He was too fast, too cagey. He growled, "Gimme room. I'll cut him apart."

THOSE blows left bleeding cuts and they had a stunning drive. Deacon Bottle took a dozen of them. Then he lunged out from the bar and staggered back as a fist whammed into his mouth. He rode it, but the bullet-headed dealer came in with swift savagery.

Deacon Bottle's timing was precise. Bullet-head caught the toe of a driving boot, with all of the Deacon's brawny bulk behind it, in the pit of his stomach. Ashy pallor leaped into his face; his grin vanished and he collapsed, rolling on the floor with both hands clasped to his belly.

In the flickering second's respite after that the Deacon saw, from the corner of his eye, a bartender with a bottle grasped by the neck, a grim look on his ugly face. And he heard Mel Haycort snap, "Not

unless you want lead in your guts, mister."

Haycort was wise enough to know that the threat of a gun was more valuable than two more fists in the fight.

The burly waiter who had opened the attack had shaken off his dizziness, was roaring like a bull, and charging in. The compact little dynamiter, Red-head, his nose broken and bloody, came with him. Pale-Eyes was loose from the faro table by now. Ignoring his cracked ribs, mouthing curses, he rushed with the others, swinging a chair over his head.

Deacon Bottle got in two stout smashes before they swarmed over him. Red-Head got him by the knees. Tripped up, the Deacon went down in a tangle of flailing arms and legs. In that desperate jumble the awkwardness of numbers favored the Deacon.

A smashing elbow to Red-Head's face freed his legs. The Deacon got his knees under him again and heaved. He came up like an outlaw bronc breaking through a brush corral. The burly waiter was draped across his shoulders. Deacon Bottle cupped a hand behind his thick neck, flipped him clear. And Pale-Eyes, wriggling to get far enough off to club with the chair, was too close to avoid a ponderous whistling fist that took him in the throat.

Then the Deacon had the chair. He broke half of the seat away over the burly bouncer's head, putting him definitely out of the fight, and completed the ruin with a hefty clout that knocked Red-Head sprawling for six feet.

Deacon Bottle dropped what was left of the splintered wreck. The brawl was over, but he wasn't grinning. He crouched, waiting, knowing that the vicious half of this clean-up was yet to come.

From across the room a revolver roared, and the Deacon moved with blurred precision. One of the silver-mounted sixguns was out and in his hand, spitting reply. Behind a far table a man dropped with a choked scream.

Deacon Bottle, his bruised and bloody face grimly set, let the muzzle of his gun weave. "Any more?"

No one moved. Deacon Bottle looked up at the great wheel supporting a dozen kerosene lamps which served as a chandelier. Deliberately he sighted at the rope by which it was lowered and raised. Someone interpreted that, bawled an excited oath, and plunged to get out from underneath. As the Deacon shot there was a scrambling rush.

The glass bases of the kerosene loaded lamps crashed into bits. Almost instantly flames licked over the mass in a sheet. Dots of fire sprayed out over tables, chairs and the floor. Voices raised to a tumult; men clawed and fought for the doors, and when they jammed, window frames were knocked out.

There was blistering hatred in Kurt Borst's eyes, but he had himself under control. He said between his teeth, "I'll cut your heart out for this!"

"'Bush me, maybe, like you did Starling?" said the Deacon softly.

"You'll think Starling was lucky!" Borst jerked his stubby gnarled body away, and without a glance at the fire which was gutting the place, strode through the wreckage to the cleared door.

Deacon Bottle looked at the pale, tight, worried face of Mel Haycort. "Nice work," he grunted. "Grab a couple of bottles. We're still drunk, remember. This place is finished, an' we got a couple more to look into before daylight."

They still tell that story in Latigo—how Deacon Bottle stayed gloriously drunk through the rest of that night and most of the next day.

THE Crystal Palace wasn't the last place to be wrecked and torched that night. Three more of Kurt Borst's dives

went up in smoke. Deacon Bottle and Mel Haycort stopped at last only because the night-shirted citizens of Latigo had their hands full putting out the fires fast enough to prevent the whole town burning.

With daylight graying the east, Deacon Bottle led the way to the Desert Eagle for a breathing space and something to drink. What they got of the first was unsatisfactory, but the abundance of the latter helped to balance the matter.

The Deacon wiped out a gambling nest they had overlooked as a result of it. Then Kurt Borst struck back.

A hired gunman, persuaded perhaps to the belief that the Deacon had been bluffing, tried his luck in a stand-up fight —and lost before one of the Deacon's silver-mounted guns. But Deacon Bottle had a nasty gash across his chest and Mel Haycort was cursing over a broken leg.

Deacon Bottle carried him to Doctor Ben Sykes, pulled his black hat a little lower on his bloody and smoke-stained forehead, and turned back.

The thing was breaking, he knew. Borst was whipped, his capital wiped out, himself discredited. There remained only the matter of jailing a few of Borst's lieutenants, and Borst himself. The charges wouldn't matter—they could be dropped after a cooling session behind bars. The important thing was to break up Borst's organization before the gambler could rally resistance.

The blow came abruptly, shockingly. In the shape of a cringing, slack-mouthed bar-fly who pressed a slip of paper into his hand, and fled.

The message was printed in ink:

> Get out and keep out! Or don't you give a damn what happens to the kid?

There was no signature. There didn't need to be. With eyes bloodshot and bitter Deacon Bottle read it twice. A leaping, deadly anger swept into his face, to be wiped away by the first real fear the Deacon had known for many years. Kurt Borst, cornered, was making his last desperate play. The gambler was ruthless enough to carry out his threat.

The Deacon's harried glance went up and down Latigo's main street. And for a moment then he cursed this town which in the past had meant so much to him and which had come to depend so heavily upon him. He had cleaned up Latigo—or nearly so. In return the town was tearing from him the thing he valued most. A few more hours was all he needed here. Yet those few hours would sacrifice Rip Carson.

There was a chance, a slim one, that he could reach the cabin in time to save the boy. But if he did that Latigo would be lost, or he, the Deacon, would return a doomed man. Kurt Borst would have the time needed to solidify his support. Quickness of action had won the battle so far; now that advantage would be lost. And Mel Haycort was out of the fight; there would be no gun at his back the rest of the way.

The Deacon's mouth set grimly and he went at a lumbering run for the livery stable. He took his big white-stockinged bay, and he picked out a rangy dun mare for a relay mount. Five minutes later he was whirling out of Latigo, pounding for the canyons and draws of the tumbled North Hills.

That ride was a drawn-out, tortured interval of doubt, of consuming weariness, of knifing fear. The picture of the boy flickered ahead of him. Again he heard Rip Carson saying, "Injuns, maybe. I'll sure keep my eyes peeled."

Deacon Bottle changed horses before entering the long avenue among the pines, and again after he had climbed the break in the canyon wall. His time was good, he judged. He had picked up nearly an hour on anyone riding this trail at a normal

pace ahead of him. And fresh sign told him unmistakably that riders had passed this way.

That torturing uncertainty ripped at him heartlessly as he swerved away from the canyon, hammered stride by stride over the last mile. And as the last timbered hump loomed before him, that doubt strengthened. A vague warning surged into his mind. It grew stronger, sweeping through him, clogging his throat. He topped the hump and went racing down the farther side. In the distance he could see the cabin, and what spread out within his sight made a futile cry burst from his throat.

HE WAS too far away to stop it, too far away to do anything but run toward it, praying that the end would not be as grim as it certainly must be.

For Rip Carson was standing in front of the cabin, gripping a useless rifle which had jammed months before, and from the first of two horsemen racing toward the cabin a wisp of smoke streamed back. A shot, probably, to frighten the kid.

Almost immediately the lead horse tripped as if an invisible wire had been strung across its path. The rider spilled out of his saddle in an arc. The second man slowed and swerved. The Deacon could see him leaning down, sawing at something with his knife. By God, it was a wire! Little Rip Carson, playing his game to the hilt, must have strung it there as a trap for his imaginary, invading Indians!

But the reaction was disastrous. The man who had been thrown was unhurt, but he crawled to his feet, apparently, in a black rage. He began to throw lead at the pathetic little figure standing by the door of the cabin.

Rip stood there for only an instant. Then he darted away, twisting and dodging and sprinting for the river. The possibility that the lad might escape spurred the two renegades to more shooting. Though he was well out of gun-range, Deacon Bottle thought too late of shooting to attract attention to himself. When he did, the sound had no effect.

The racket of sixgun explosions drifted back to him, sickeningly. Luck had kept the boy safe till now; but at any moment that luck might break.

Rip was within twenty-five feet of the river, with the two renegades perhaps forty yards behind him. A pile of huge boulders lay in front of him around which the river curved. The boy sprang for them, went scrambling up until he was outlined against the hills beyond.

He stopped there in a crouch, turning for an instant to look back. . . . Then it was that the bullet hit him.

Deacon Bottle saw his thin frame quiver from the impact; he saw Rip's arms jerk convulsively as he failed to catch himself, and went plunging down, the rifle flashing in the sunlight as it spun out of his clawing fingers.

Deacon Bottle cut abruptly to the left, his panic-stricken gaze striking at the foamy surface of the river. The two renegades sent by Kurt Borst were forgotten. With a desperate, searing concentration Deacon Bottle watched for the boy to come bobbing up below the rocks. But the river here, swollen by the fall rains, showed nothing.

Back and forth along that bank the Deacon rode, dread and desperation mounting in him until it verged on madness. He clung fiercely, minute after minute, to the hope that the little golden head would be flung into sight by the torrent.

The Deacon found nothing. Not even a ragged scrap of clothing. He followed the river down until it poured into a sheer-sided canyon through which he could not pass. When he rode back his hands were trembling and the last shred of his hope was gone.

He looked up dully when he came again within sight of the cabin Borst's two renegades had pulled out, not as blind to the Deacon's presence as he had been to theirs.

For minutes the Deacon sat stupidly staring ahead of him, seeing nothing. He couldn't believe that Rip was gone. Yet he had seen it. The fact left a gaping, agonizing hole in his consciousness. It had been a piece of insensate devilishness. And the fault was Latigo's—or, more truly, Kurt Borst's.

For an instant a spark of wild fury coursed through Deacon Bottle. It died because the feeling was too intense to be endured. It left him with a thick weight clogging his heart.

He swung the bay about, and like a man drugged, headed for Latigo. There would be guns waiting for him down there. Borst had had all the time he needed, and Borst and his killers would be waiting. It was a death-trap the Deacon would be riding into. He knew it, and he wanted it. The days ahead—without Rip—would be grim and bitter torment, and the Deacon didn't want to face them.

IT WAS just dusk when the bay plodded wearily into Latigo's main street. The Deacon noted dully that it was strangely empty. The places that had burned were gaping black holes.

Would it be a bullet in the back, the Deacon wondered. Let it be quick, as quick as possible. He went on slowly, and then a voice came out of the dusk behind him.

"Deacon!"

The Deacon stopped. Before he turned he saw the shadowy figure of a man move out a little from the building wall on the left. That puts one of them behind me, he thought, but he turned nevertheless.

The street had been empty before. Now there was a man on either side of it. The man on the right was the stocky Borst.

Deacon Bottle sat his saddle silently, making no move to draw his guns which the open flaps of his coat exposed. He wondered for a moment why a bullet hadn't been put into him simply and cleanly. Then he understood. Borst wanted him to fight. Borst had to regain the prestige he had lost!

They had him neatly pocketed. There was no doubt as to the outcome, but it would be a fight. Deacon Bottle, gun-artist, would die in the dirt of Latigo's main street. The Deacon laughed, and the sound was raw, rasping. It didn't matter. The sooner, the better. . . .

Borst's voice came dryly. "You figure on making some arrests, do you, Deacon?"

The Deacon didn't answer.

Borst said, after a while "Well, what in hell are you waiting for?"

Grimly impatient, the Deacon said nothing. The tension in the street grew tight, like a smothering, invisible blanket.

Borst's voice took on a warning guttural note: "If you haven't the guts to come to me—"

Then a new voice broke in sharply: "Deacon, for God's sake, what's the matter with you? Deacon, I been waitin' here—"

Deacon Bottle didn't swing his head nor answer, though the voice was Mel Haycort's. He experienced a weary anger because Mel Haycort was so loyal. Mel had known what was going to happen. He had had himself lugged out onto the walk, broken leg and all.

Haycort didn't speak again. The dusk was settling more thickly. With it came that tension which Haycort had broken. It mounted until the silence was like a high whine. Out of it, when it seemed on the verge of exploding, came the faint beat of hurrying hoofs.

It came from beyond the town with a stumbling unevenness, as if the mount was played out. The delay disturbed and

angered the Deacon. He lifted his head, scowled through the gathering darkness. There was still light enough to make out the horse as it came into the head of the street. And something about it shocked the Deacon's memory. He recognized the dun mare he had taken from the livery stable as a relay mount.

There was something, too, about the rider. A ragged, golden head, hatless, lifted above the dun's ears. And then the face—pinched, small, with wide eyes! It couldn't be, and yet it was. Rip Carson was alive! He was astride the staggering dun, riding into the middle of this death-trap!

A BARRIER within the Deacon snapped suddenly. He was yelling, "Get back, Rip! Get back, Mel!"

He was plunging down past the shoulder of his bay, rolling clear of the stirrups. Gun thunder smashed out along the street. A chunk of lead slashed a furrow along the Deacon's thigh. He heard the smack of bullets hitting the bay, and had to roll again as the bay fell.

Guns were crashing behind him. That would be Haycort, propped up, thumbing lead at the rear corner of the triangle. That brief flash was all the thinking Deacon Bottle had time to do, for he was sprawled half behind the bay's body, with hot lead churning up dirt into his face.

Then the deacon's guns were free of leather, kicking up in his fists. The drum-roll of the shooting thundered and banged between the building fronts. Spouts of flame came darting at him from two angles. A stubby figure was running at him through the gloom. It was a matter of swiftly-racing seconds. The Deacon kicked out shots, first right and then left.

The flame stopped spearing at him on the left. That stubby figure came charging on, hit but not stopped. Kurt Borst was no coward. But behind him suddenly loomed the running dun!

The mare's shoulder struck him in the back, knocking him down. Kurt Borst plowed on his chest, but he was up on his knees with the quickness of a cat, lifting his gun and firing. The bullet tore away the brim of the Deacon's hat. It was the last shot, but one, of the fight, for then the Deacon's bullet hit Borst squarely in the throat. . . .

Deacon Bottle got up shakily. While he was lifting Rip down from the saddle he croaked, "Mel—you all right?"

Haycort growled, "I tallied this back-shootin' jasper. What I want to know is what in hell ailed you, when—"

That explanation had to wait. Deacon Bottle was kneeling down so that his own face was close to the boy's. His voice wasn't steady as he said, "Kid, I saw you go off that rock into the river. I thought you were dead. You got hit, didn't you?"

Scared a little, but grinning, Rip Carson blurted, "Gosh, Deacon, only a little cut on my arm. That didn't hurt. An' I didn't go in the river. I was on the rock, an' I fell that way a-purpose so's to fool them highbinders. Instead of goin' in the river I curled up on that ledge just under the rock. That ledge where I almost caught that whoppin' big fish. . . ."

Deacon Bottle wiped sweat out of his eyes. "An' me stompin' up an' down that river bank, thinkin' you was on bottom somewhere."

"I didn't know it was you," Rip defended. "I was scared to come out, on account of they might still be there. Soon as I'd figured they'd gone I came out an' caught that mare—had an awful time—an' come humpin' to find you."

Deacon Bottle tried to put severity into his voice, and didn't quite make it. "Reckon I ought to give you a lickin'," he said, "but maybe I'll skip it this time. Come along now. You can be pickin' out fishlines while I do a little explainin' to the sheriff!"

Gun-Prophet of Perdition

By Stone Cody

Gaunt, cursing, sweating men were in the traces in place of the horses, while that lean, big-boned figure, inspired by maniacal energy, drove them forward. . . .

THE SUN was a fiery red ball directly ahead, sinking into the haze of heat and dust which lifted somberly toward the blood-colored sky. But the sun's heat seemed to blast upward now from the ground, as though, unable any longer to blaze down its blinding-white torture from the sky, it had contrived to thrust it through the earth itself. It came up as heat does from the hot iron top of a stove.

Caleb Strang pulled his horse to a halt and turned, looking at the straggling line of wagons behind him. They made a strange and somehow disastrous sight in the red murky light, winding, inching forward unevenly, like a broken-backed snake—infinitely lonely, despite their numbers, in the stricken immensity of this distorted land.

For a moment, fear lifted in Strang, striking at the hard strength of his knees where they gripped the saddle, plucking at his stomach so that it felt nervous and

Epic novelette of a man who could not quit

Cursed as a heartless, man-breaking killer driven on by his own bitter pride, Cal Strang led that little bunch of half starved, rebellious men and women farther into the desert hell. . . . For he had sworn that they might die—but he would never lead them back!

weak. Weak—that was it! They were too weak, these men and women, these gaunted, big-hoofed horses, this ramshackle line of nondescript wagons, top-heavy with bedding, with stoves, with the curve of ploughshares. What chance had they against a land which struck as this was doing, savagely, relentlessly, with a malevolent ingenuity of constant torture?

Strang had known that there was to be this desert crossing, but he had not imagined it could be so long or so hard. Had he been wrong to uproot these people from their homes, from what little security they had had? The responsibility for it was his entirely, and for a moment, as the somber gray of his eyes brooded over the oncoming train, his shoulders sagged. Then his mouth hardened, and he straightened in the saddle. There must be no going back now. Somehow, he had to find the strength to carry them, to fire them with his own purpose—with the vision which burned always in his own mind.

Sitting so, with the gray of his eyes flaring suddenly into tawny yellow, he made an arresting and curiously dynamic figure. A wide-shouldered, big-chested, lean-hipped man of thirty, with the high, broad forehead of the dreamer—a hint of fanaticism about the temples, maybe—and below that the rugged, vital features of the man of action, their hardness offset a little by a wide, mobile mouth which promised possibilities of humor. A homely face, older than his years because of what time had etched into it, with a jut of nose and stubborn jaw, yet with an odd attractiveness about it.

After a moment, he rode back toward the train. At the lead wagon, he wheeled and rode alongside the seat, casting an estimating eye at the thin, plodding team.

"Better keep goin' until it's plumb dark," he said to Hack Henderson on the seat. "We won't be able to do no more night travelin' until we get the moon back."

Hack Henderson nodded silently. Strang saw that his lips were swollen and cracked, and that his reddened eyes sat deep in his head. Myra Henderson looked bad, too. He smiled at her, a quick warmth about his eyes and mouth.

"Won't be long now, Myra," he said gently. "How's Julie?"

The woman tried to return his smile through lips stiff with anxiety. "Feverish," she said briefly. "She's worse, I'm afraid."

Strang frowned, then forced himself to look cheerful. "Don't go to worryin' yourself now," he said. "We'll see if we can't fix her up better soon's we stop." A grinning tow-head looked out of the wagon flap at him.

"Hi, Cal."

Strang returned the grin and greeting. "That bucko looks hearty, anyways!" he said to Myra Henderson, as he rode on.

But his features were suddenly somber as he turned away. He knew that the Hendersons had been giving their own water to the children, and especially to little Julie. That was bad. They couldn't keep on that way. He'd have to see that they got an extra ration. . . .

HE RODE down the line, calling out cheerfully to the people in the wagons as he passed, seeing a kind of reflection of his own vigor come into some of their faces, but sensing a sullenness and hostility in others.

As he came to the sixth wagon the near horse went down suddenly. Strang swore under his breath. He knew what that meant. The horse would not get up again. He yelled an order up the line to Henderson, and climbed out of the saddle.

A girl got down off the wagon seat, stiffly, staggering a little as she faced him. "I've been afraid of that," she said huskily.

Strang's eyes took her in worriedly.

"You haven't been drinkin' enough water," he said roughly. "Givin' your drink rations to that old rapscallion?"

The girl summoned pertness to her aid. "Rapscallion yourself!" she said. "There's nothing the matter with me."

He stood looking at her a brief moment, with the hardness of his features suddenly gone, his gaze thirstily drinking up the

full womanliness of her. She was tall, with a supple, ample-bodied strength. Her yellow hair went back in heavy waves from her forehead, so that the weight of it might have seemed too much, except that the white round column of her neck sat so strongly on full shoulders. Her eyes were deeply blue, with a serene gravity back of them, and the sweet full curve of her mouth matched the generosity of firm, high breasts and ample hips.

A proper woman, he thought, feeling suddenly his need for her and take its place by the side of that other elemental hunger of his—for the land, for rich earth of his own, where he might strike root deeply, where the force he felt within him might bear full fruit.

"Be fruitful and multiply." For an instant the words were a chant, exultant, under the surface of his thoughts. Then he turned brusquely away, to help unharness the horse. Felicity Randall stood looking after him a moment, then turned back to the wagon, to begin the necessary job of unloading.

A boy of about ten, with Felicity's eyes and chin, set off by a wealth of freckles, had come down from the seat and gone directly to the horse. Now he turned a tragic face to Strang. "Do we have to lose her—ol' Bess?" he asked.

Strang nodded.

"Gee," the boy said softly, "Gee, that's tough."

Cal Strang put a big hand on his shoulder. "Shore, it's tough," he said warmly, "but shucks, we're tough, too. We'll make out, won't we partner—you an' me?"

Jackie Randall drew a deep breath. "Shore," he said, and his eyes were suddenly adoring, "shore, Cal—they cain't git us down!"

"What's this? What's this? That there hoss down? Git her up—why don't ye? Git her up!"

A spidery, bright-eyed skeleton of some eighty odd years swarmed out of the wagon and was dancing around, spluttering importantly. But before Cal could answer, the oldster had apparently forgotten the matter and had turned around to pour out advice to Felicity. This was old Jackdaw Randall, Felicity's and Jack's grandfather, who was progressing towards childhood even more rapidly than Jackie was toward manhood.

At Strang's order, the train had swung into a circle to make camp, for it would be dark before the business of transferring goods from the Randall wagon was done.

In the late, clear, desert light, the scene was one of silent, weary activity, as the train went about getting ready for the night. Men and women moved slowly, with drooping shoulders. Eyes were deep-sunken, tortured, fear-tormented. No one knew how long this desert stretch would last. Water was getting desperately low. It looked as though they were toiling tortuously deeper and deeper in disaster, toward a death which waited, mocking and sinister, there in the red light to the west.

AS STRANG supervised the unloading of the wagon, his keen gaze flicked here and there throughout the camp, estimating the temper of the crowd, turning over the problem of keeping them bent to his will.

"No, not the stove, Felicity," he said curtly.

Felicity stared at him tragically. "Not the stove?" she protested. "But Cal—"

"You've got to cut down to the last ounce," Strang interrupted her, gruffly. "The other wagons are already overloaded. We'll have to get most of your stuff packed on your other horse. Even findin' a place for you three to ride is goin' to be difficult!"

Several of the men had come up to help with the unloading. They turned now and stared at Strang indecisively.

Rafe Head laughed in sudden harsh derision.

"It ain't *his* stove, Felicity!" he jibed. "*He* don't give a damn."

He was a big blond man in his late twenties, an inch or so shorter than Strang but heavy-set, powerfully muscled, and with a kind of violence running beneath the surface of features that were cleanly cut and regular. Just now, his blue eyes smouldered angrily, his manner was hard and challenging.

Strang's eyes went granite-hard. "Don't try to make trouble, Rafe," he said quietly. "I'm still runnin' the train."

Head gave a short, harsh laugh. "You're still runnin' it just where you started to run it—into trouble. You've bungled everythin', Strang. An' now the rest of us got to suffer for it—while we're still alive."

Strang's body drew taut, his senses suddenly alive, acute, flaring danger. This was the beginning—the threat that had to be crushed before the infection of it ran through the crowd.

"What's the matter, Rafe—turnin' yellow?" His voice ran cold, contemptuous. He gave no sign that he had heard the murmur of encouragement for Head's attitude which ran through the others. He must deal strictly with Rafe Head.

Heat flared under Head's high, flat cheekbones. "Not yellow enough to pick on women an' kids an' old men!" he blazed. "Not so yellow that I wouldn't admit I was wrong before I shoved a crowd of helpless folks farther into this hell. Your damn bull-headedness is goin' to kill us all, Strang. It's time to turn back!"

A lean, reddish-whiskered man with a cast in one of his pale eyes moved suddenly. "You're dang right," he snarled. "We've had enough!" That was Red Simmons.

Beside him, Bucky Grafton, short, dark, hard-mannered, moved his thick lips in assent. "If he don't know where he's goin' any better than this," he said, turning to the crowd which had been drawn by Head's sharp, fighting voice, "we'll all land in hell—the real one, that'll make this desert look like a two-bit imitation."

Strang disregarded them. "You knew what you were getting into, Head," he snapped. "Now you haven't got the guts to go through with it." He took a swift step toward the blond man. "Or maybe it ain't that," he rasped. "Maybe you're tryin' to make trouble for another reason. You been foolin' around Felicity here, knowin' she was my gal."

Felicity's soft, indignant, "Oh!" struck at his ears, but he did not pause.

It was true that he considered Felicity as his own, but he knew also that there had never been an agreement between them. He was talking to make this revolt seem like a personal matter between him and Head, to drag the latter's hidden motives out and thus weaken the force of what he said before the crowd.

"Now you see a chance to take Felicity's part against me—an' to show yourself off as a man that ought to be leader instead of me," his voice ran on like a lash. "You fool! You haven't got a chance either way. It needs a man, for both jobs—an' you ain't up to either. There's a reason for that, Head"—his eyes were flaring now—"It ain't only jealousy that talks in you—it's yellowness, too!"

That leashed violence in Head broke free, as Strang had coldly known it would in the end. Deliberately he had provoked it, and now, as the blond man's right fist swung, Strang's left snapped up. It landed flush on Rafe's mouth, snapping his head back and neutralizing the force of his blow.

Strang chopped a right like the kick of a mule. Head staggered backward, recovered, then came in, wary now, his powerful shoulders weaving, seeking an opening. Strang stood off, his feet shift-

ing cat-like, and cut him to ribbons. Fury burned up wild in Rafe, burnt away his caution. He rushed, bull-like, head down.

Strang stopped him with a left, then his big, iron-knuckled fists swung in short arcs to the other man's temples. The impact of knuckles on bone rang sharp and shocking. Rafe's head snapped first right then left. He staggered, arms dropping, then the explosive, violent *bop* of Strang's right behind his ear, sent him down.

Strang stared down at his unmoving figure for a moment, then lifted his head to the silent crowd.

Red Simmons stood crouched a little, his hand clawed over the butt of his frontier Colt, his eyes venomous. Strang's gaze locked with his. He had known that Simmons would be this way, had gambled that he would not shoot until the fight with Head was over.

Now Strang said coldly, "I've got one, too, Simmons. Pull it, if you feel lucky."

BESIDE Simmons, Bucky Grafton visibly tensed. Some of the venom drained out of Red's eyes, as he fought to match Strang's gaze, then suddenly his glance wavered. He ran a tongue over dry lips.

"The time for shootin' ain't come yet, Strang," he said. "But I'll say what I think."

"You haven't got anythin' to think with," Strang told him contemptuously.

His arm swept in a sudden impatient gesture which took in the rest of them. "I don't know how many of you have been listenin' to this fool talk of goin' back," he snapped, "but we better take that up now, an' get it done with. It's five days back to water, travelin' light an' fast. Some of you might make it; others of you wouldn't. What if you did? What would you be goin' back to? To starve out a life-time on that land you was stuck with? Go back broke, with your horses dead, your goods sittin' out in the desert? You couldn't make a go of it there before. You didn't own that land—it owned you—it, and the crook who mortgaged it to you. You can't make a livin' on it. What'll you do? Beg charity, because you haven't got the guts to face a stretch of tough goin'?" His words struck out at them like blows, lashed at them like whips.

Then suddenly his manner changed. "Out there," he said, quietly, motioning toward the afterglow, "lies water, and game for food. This desert isn't endless. Your best chance is to go on. But that isn't all. Have you forgotten? Has a little hardship an' fear driven it out of your minds? We're goin' toward land that *is* land—watered, deep and rich." Then the passion in the man blazed out like a sudden flame. "There's plenty there for all. Deep black earth, fit to drive a plow into. Grass, belly-high for fat cattle. Timber for houses. A heritage rich as a man ever had—and yours for the taking!" He raised his arms up, closing his big hands in a strong, gripping clasp. "Yours and your children's—a valley of homes—green pastures—the earth giving back tenfold what a man puts into it. Are you goin' to let a little cowardice, a little discouragement keep you from it?" For a long moment he was silent, holding them with his eyes, feeling the power go out of him and grip them. Then he dropped his arms. "No," he said quietly. "We'll go on. Make camp."

They went, silent or murmuring a little, but he could see that the murmuring was now not discontent. The lift of their heads and shoulders showed him that. He had them. It might not last long, but he had them for now.

Rafe Head had gotten up from the ground. He stood with his powerful body swaying a little and glared pure hatred at Strang.

"This ain't the end of this, Strang,"

he said hoarsely. "I'm goin' to kill you for this."

"Rafe," Strang said steadily, "we could be friends."

"Friends!" Head spat the word. "I'll think of bein' friends when I see you dead. Next time I'll come at you with a gun!"

Strang's solid lips lengthened and his eyes were somber. "I'll be ready when you are," he said, "to be friends—or anything else you want."

As Head moved off, he turned to where Jackdaw Randall was poking furtively in the pile of discarded stuff from the wagon. All during the unloading, Jackdaw had been hopping about, with a tin box weighting his arm, protesting vehemently at the loss of their possessions. Now he was extracting a good-sized mirror from the pile.

At Strang's brusque movement, he took alarm, and hastily tried to shove the mirror back from where he had gotten it. His arm loosened on the tin box and it fell, striking against the foot of the stove, the top jarring open.

Jackdaw let out a frantic squawk and dived for the box, slapping the lid on and clutching the box to him, but not before Strang had seen that it was solidly filled with something which glittered in the licking flames of the campfire.

Old Jackdaw backed away, his bright eyes secretive and frightened, then turned and scuttled off. A figure stepped out of the shadow of the abandoned wagon and stooped hastily, picking something up from the ground. It was Red Simmons.

"I'll take that," Strang said curtly.

The lean man faced him, hard-eyed. Then sullenly, handed it to him. His eyes were poisonous.

Strang felt the shape and outline of the object, knew that it was a coin, but he kept his eyes on Simmons.

"Red," he said softly, "I always did think it was a mistake to bring you an' Bucky along. You ain't farmers, an' you don't belong in this crowd. I don't know why you came along, but I'm guessin' you're on the run. Now, I'll give you a word of advice—while you're here, play it smart. If you get in my way, I'll stomp you like I'd stomp a snake. Understand?"

Red Simmons' lips writhed back in a sneer. "You tell it scarey, don't you, sodbuster?" he murmured, and turned away.

And Strang knew suddenly that he had made a mistake.

Simmons might be bluffed out in a gunfight, but he could not be bluffed into being good. Threatened, he became dangerous, as a copperhead is dangerous.

Presently, he walked toward the fire so that he could look at the coin in his hand. It was a twenty-dollar gold piece!

CHAPTER TWO

Trail of Unmarked Graves

HE STOOD there frowning, a sense of astonishment running through him. Old Jackdaw had long been laughed at as the most miserly man in the colony. He had gotten his name because of the childish way he clung to worn out and broken things, collecting them and hiding them away. But it became obvious now that the old man's curious miserliness had borne other and astonishing fruit. That tin box was filled with gold. It contained a fortune!

Strang wondered if Felicity Randall knew of it. The family had seemed desperately poor. He felt a sudden surge of anger, as it came to him that all the while this old man had had in his possession the means to lighten Felicity's lot, to buy for her and her brother land fit to live on. Instead he had hoarded it away.

He shrugged. Where they were going gold would be of little use. Then his frown returned. No, that wasn't literally true. Gold could always be of use. Not only to the Randall's but to others. That

tin box of old Jackdaw's held the germ of trouble, bad trouble. And Red Simmons must also know of the old man's secret fortune!

Slowly, he put the gold piece in his pocket, meaning to return it to Jackdaw as soon as he got him alone.

Then, as he remembered little Julie Henderson, the whole matter went from his mind.

He made his way over to the Henderson wagon. Myra Henderson showed him a strained face in the darkness, the shadow of her eyes holding panic.

Julie lay on a bed of straw in the wagon, tossing and moaning. Her skin was burning hot to his touch.

Strang's lips set grimly. He turned away to the wagon that held the water. As he came toward it, a shadow darted away from the back of the wagon. Strang moved fast, seized the fleeing man.

He yanked him around, found himself looking into the craven eyes of Keeler Fagg, a turkey-necked, weak-chinned small man whom Strang had never liked. Fagg had a tin cup in his hand, the edge of it still wet. A dark blotch of spilled water on the tailboard of the wagon completed the story.

Strang lifted his hand and slapped him until his fingers tingled. "You damn, sneakin' thievin' cheat!" he breathed. "If you can't think of the women an' children in this outfit, then think of your own skin. If I go out there an' tell that crowd you've been stealin' water, they'll tear you apart!"

Fagg was whimpering. "Please, Cal—d-don't. I—I couldn't stand it. I—won't do it no more, Cal. I swear—"

Strang thrust him from him, so that he stumbled and fell. "Git," he said contemptuously.

Afterwards, he turned to the barrel and carefully filled the two canteens he had brought. His face was sober and reluctant.

That night he sat up with Julie Henderson, putting wet cloths at intervals on her face and body. Myra Henderson sat with him until Strang's insistence and her own exhaustion overcame her, and she slept. Later, Hack Henderson relieved Cal so that he could get a couple of hours' sleep.

HE SPREAD his blankets by the water barrel, but for a long while he could not sleep. His nerves and muscles were jumpy with fatigue and his mind jittered over the events of the day and the possibilities of the morrow. Looking up at the blazing desert stars, he tried to stop the disconnected series of pictures it presented to him—his youth on the rocky, barren farm in the West Virginia hills; then the War—between the States. Days of sweat and agony, cold and hungry, and exhausted nights; the glowing, lying prospectus which had persuaded them to sell out their almost worthless land and come west to settle on land still more worthless.

His father had died during the War, and he and his mother had been alone. Slowly, bitterly, helplessly, he had watched the harsh new country sap her strength, her hope, and in the end kill her.

He would have gone away, if it had not been for Felicity Randall. Then there had been that day of blinding vision when Crowline Crosby had talked.

The old mountain man, trapper and prospector had stayed a night with Strang on his way to a new gold discovery in the Black Hills, and had evidently taken a liking to the younger man. In the morning he had eyed Strang's land contemptuously. "Don't see why you'd waste a day on it," he had snapped, and gone on to tell of valley land to the west, rich with soil and water. He had told Strang of one valley in particular which he said would make a farmer's or rancher's paradise. Had drawn a rough map for him.

And somehow, the old man's keen, honest blue eyes and forthright speech had carried conviction, had lighted a fire in Strang's breast.

From then on he had spent his time in an attempt to fire the other members of the colony with his own enthusiasm. He could, of course, have gone alone, but that was not the dream which inspired him. His vision was of a new colony—a settlement rich and prosperous, composed of these beaten, harassed men and women who, like himself, fought a losing battle with barren, hopeless soil which had never been meant to feel the plow in the first place. They were his neighbors, his friends. He wanted to lead them, too, out of the wilderness and on into green pastures. And in the end, his eloquence—and their own despair—had won his point.

Only, it hadn't proven as easy as he had expected. Crowline had said, "You'll have a stretch of desert to cross. Take plenty of water." But there hadn't been any hint of this agony.

Lying there, he told himself that it was not the prospector's fault. No doubt, one man, traveling light and fast, with plenty of water could have made this desert crossing easily enough. Crowline had not guessed that he meant to travel with a slow, cumbersome wagon-train, filled with women and children.

It didn't mean that Crowline was untrustworthy. Nor did it mean that the valley did not exist, that the map was no good. It only meant that it would be harder than they expected. Well, some way he had to keep them together, keep them going—he, the leader. . . .

On that thought, he finally fell asleep.

Next day, despite the exhaustion which clawed at him, he seemed inspired by a devil of restless energy. He drove them, pleaded with them, laughed at them, cheered them, cursed them, babied them, lifted them almost physically over mile after burning mile of that barren land.

That day, they lost another wagon, and that day, too, the last of the water gave out. They were walking now—all of them except a few of the children—to lighten the load of the horses. And what had looked like a wagon train threatened with disaster in the light of the last sunset, looked now like some scene of torture out of hell. The sand and sharp rocks had cut their boots away. They walked, with cracked lips and sunken eyes, on blistered and bleeding feet.

Sunset found them staggering with exhaustion, waterless, unable to shove food down their swollen throats. And at sunset, Julie Henderson died.

They dug a shallow grave for her and buried her as the last light ebbed. Marked by a small slab of wood, the small mound looked infinitely lonely and pitiful in the great reach of that desolation. And standing over it, Myra Henderson, her eyes insane with grief, lifted her clenched fist to Cal Strang.

"You killed her!" she cried out. "You murdered her!"

That night all the strength seemed drained from Strang. He sat in the silent circle, enduring the looks of hatred and hostility because he still had will enough in him to know that he must not leave them alone to talk and plot against him. If he faced them down, they would do nothing. Exhaustion and the agony of thirst would have their way with them. They would sleep, and this new crisis would pass. . . .

But that night was a Gethsemane for him—a brooding agony out of which Julie's small face looked at him reproachfully.

Only, later, there was Felicity's warm, firm hand on his shoulder, comforting him, letting him know that she understood and did not blame him.

It was like a sudden light in darkness. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Caravan Into Hell

DAWN found them desperate-eyed, in revolt against facing another day of agony under that merciless sun, yet somehow Strang got them going, the men and women staggering and falling, the horses head-down and trembling-legged. He got them going and kept them going, through hours when it seemed impossible for him to take another step himself. Yet he took a dozen to their one—up and down the line, urging, exhorting, picking out the horses that were stronger and putting exhausted women into wagons until they could walk again. Then there came that unbelievable hour in late afternoon when the horses of the lead team pricked up their ears and surged forward at a sudden, stumbling trot. Water! They had smelled water!

It proved to be a brackish, bitter sink in the desert, but the water was not poisonous. They laughed and cried, drank, filled barrels and canteens, watered the horses and even bathed.

All next day they rested by the water hole, then went on.

The country had begun more and more to break up into a maze of arroyos, small twisted buttes, miniature battlements, grotesque upthrusts of varicolored rock. And the mountains, which had showed hazily blue, disappearing sometimes altogether under the heat-haze, now reared up plainly, unbelievably close.

The land began to rise, slanting up into rough foothills, with scrub-oak and greasewood showing. And now a new problem arose, the food was beginning to get alarmingly low. And there was no game visible in these rocky, barren hills.

They hit a canyon which had pools of stagnant water in it and followed it along. Presently, the pools became more numerous and closer together, until they merged into a stream which ran down from the high hills and here petered out.

They followed it along. Strang, burning with renewed energy now, urged them forward. Up in the high hills they'd find game, berries to eat, he promised.

Game? There was none. And as mile succeeded mile, the hope that it lay ahead began to die. The mountains that reared before them had been blue, hulking shapes in the distance, vaguely holding the promise of nourishment. But as they drew nearer they showed rocky and barren, apparently devoid of vegetation.

They were in the foot-hills now, following a way which grew hourly more rocky and difficult. Men had to put their shoulders to the wheels to help the horses pull up steep slopes or over stretches of boulders. A wagon wheel smashed, so badly that it could not be mended, and that wagon had to be left, tipped down by the side of the trail. It looked lonely and strangely desolate back there, mute reminder of loss, of hardships endured and trial and danger ahead. The sight of it struck fear into the hearts of the men and women who looked back.

One of the women was sick, unable to walk any more, and, of the men, Hen Murch was worse than sick, Strang thought. Hen had always dreaded the trip. He had consented to go along mostly out of weakness, because his friends and neighbors were going, but he had had a melancholy conviction from the beginning that the venture would kill him.

Strang had tried to keep him cheered up, spending more time with him and with his lean, bitter-tongued wife than with most others, but Murch had relapsed daily deeper and deeper into silence and melancholy. His long-featured, hopeless face had gotten thin and drawn and every step he took was somehow a gesture of despair.

Both the woman ill in the wagon and Hen Murch's sodden hopelessness seemed to act on the entire party as foreboding of disaster, working on nerves already stretched tight by exhaustion and starvation.

THEN came the day when they topped the last foothill ridge and stood face to face with the mountains themselves. The sight brought a sudden gasp, multiple and eloquent, from each group as it came up. Across a broad, level valley the wall of the great range reared like a granite barrier, ominous and impassable. Peak on peak, bare and rocky, reaching up to remote pine-darkened bands which gave way to bare rock again and to the glistening crests of white snow.

Strang stared broodingly. Crowline had spoken of the "mountings" but he had not given Strang any idea of this. Looking at it now, bitterness filled him, and a kind of growing anger, as of a man swindled.

He could feel the eyes of the others on him, despairing, sardonic or accusing. Hollow, weary eyes, in which hatred now openly showed. But there were others, and they were in the majority, who looked at him dumbly, as though mutely asking him for help, as though they would be lost without his leadership. He felt the strength, the hardness in him draw up, until it was a band of armor tightening about the sickness of disappointment and despair in him.

He turned to them, his head lifted, his voice casual. "There's a pass, a little to the north. And when we get into it, we'll begin to run into game. Let's keep goin'. Lead out, Hen."

But Hen Murch seemed not to hear him. He was sitting motionless on the ground, his head supported in his hands. When Strang walked over to him and repeated his order, he lifted apathetic eyes and faintly whispered, "I might as well die here. For I ain't goin' on!"

Strang's temper surged up, threatened to break its leash. He reached down and caught Murch by his shirt, jerking him to his feet. "You'll go on," he blazed. "Nobody's dyin'. Git to your wagon!"

"You leave my man alone, you devil!" It was Xena Murch shrieking at him. You've done enough to kill us. You take your hands off him."

"Quiet, woman!" Strang thundered at her. "You—"

But Murch's resistance had been like touching off a fuse. The revolt flared up like a powder train. Unexpectedly, it was Keeler Fagg who flung himself next against Strang.

Fagg's face was a writhing mask of fear—fear of Strang warring with terror of the unknown.

"I ain't goin' no farther," he blabbered. "The settlement's to the south of here—, down in the Little Uinta country. I'm agoin' there. I won't stop fer ye—I won't! I got enough."

"By God, he's right!" Rafe Head cut in. "There *are* settlements down there, an' we can make 'em!"

A quick mutter of interest, of sudden hope ran through the crowd.

"You fools!" Strang was a fiery figure of wrath and implacable purpose. "It'd take us a month to get there—if we could even make it. Settlements? I'll show you a settlement worth the seein'. We're goin' on!"

Felicity Randall flung up her head, a sudden flare of indignation in her eyes. "You're pig-headed, Cal," she flung at him. "You're not thinking of what will happen if we try to go on. It may take us a month to reach the settlements to the south, but at least the going will be easier. Hen Murch isn't well enough to go up into those mountains. Neither is grandad. And there's Sophia Cotter, sick there in the wagon. You've got to think of the people who are weaker than you."

"I've got to think of all of us, and why we came!" Strang blazed. "Damn the weak! We're not bein' licked by a lot of yeller-bellied quitters. We're goin' through!"

Anger raged through him, but underneath, held down by his will, was a numbing sense of shock, as a man feels at the first impact of a bullet. Felicity Randall's turning against him was a blow he had not counted on. Later, the pain of it would be like a raw wound in his breast, but now he had to fight—if necessary he must fight Felicity along with the rest.

KEELER FAGG was still sweating with the panic that filled him, but there was in him the cringing courage of a cornered rat. "Let them as wants to go on, go on," he yammered, "an' them as wants to, make fer the settlements. I ain't goin' on. I ain't!"

Burning with anger Strang sprang for him, shook him violently. "You water-stealin' snake," he yelled, "shut your face before I tear you apart. We're goin' together. It's our only chance. God knows, I'd rather get rid of you—but nobody's leavin'. But we're standin' together an' goin' on!"

He swung on the crowd. "I caught him stealin' water back in the desert," he flung at them. "I ought to have killed him then, but I let him go, because we may need every hand. I tell you of it now, so you'll know the kind of sneakin' varmint you're listenin' to."

He flung Fagg violently away from him so that he sprawled on the ground. "Git to your wagon!" he raged.

The crowd was silent, wavering, yet impressed by his charge against Fagg and by the force of will that blazed out of him. Then, suddenly, help came from an unexpected quarter.

"South's too far," Red Simmons said abruptly. "Bucky an' me knows a settlement closer—to the north, up in the mountains. Maybe, we can git to it through the same pass Strang's talkin' about."

It was enough to make them give way. Slowly, uncertainly, they turned back toward their wagons. Only, Rafe Head remained facing him, his flat, high cheeks dark with violent color, his eyes hot and purposeful.

Strang's nerves buzzed sudden warning. Rafe's hand was on the butt of his sixgun.

Then swiftly, quietly, Felicity Randall stepped in between them, her back to Strang. She put out a hand and touched Head's arm. "No, Rafe," she said quietly.

Head's eyes came to her with a swift look of surprise. The hatred drained out of them. He hesitated a moment, then took her arm and turned away.

Strang felt suddenly as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach. Moodily, he got the train into motion.

All that day, he tried to make a chance to speak to Felicity alone, but it was plain that she was avoiding it. That night at camp, his impatience would wait no longer.

He took her by the arm. "I want to talk to you," he said harshly.

She looked at him a moment indecisively, then her lips tightened. She came with him silently, away from the group.

"Felicity," he said, and then stopped, realizing all at once that he had nothing to say to her. Everything had been said. He could only beg her to understand him, to stand by him, and yet some pride deep in him balked at that.

But the girl did not wait to hear his plea. Her blue eyes were cool, scornful. "It's no use, Cal," she told him crisply. "I didn't know you were like this. I like a man who is strong, but not one who is willing to kill people to get his

by blood and the kinship of toil. They had been happy, too; even when the cattlemen who lorded the valley had threatened to evict the nesters and fear had spread its insidious toils among the squatters. Now the growing feeling between the two factions had culminated in an ultimatum from the ranchers: "Get out before sundown—or die!"

Two hours ago Jefferson Wade had taken a gun in his hand. "You wait here, son," he told his boy. "I don't 'spect I'll be gone long. These cowmen are running a bluff, likely."

That had been two hours ago. Chet had found Jeff Wade a hundred yards from the shack, badly wounded, weak from the pain of crawling homeward.

So young Chet waited beside the bunk, praying that his father would find strength to speak before Death's dark wings fluttered close.

Father and son were much alike. At fourteen the boy's stringy body showed signs of developing to the solid bulk of his sire. Both had lean, pleasant faces. Both had butter-colored hair and blue eyes. But now Jefferson Wade's eyes were glazed with pain, and Chet's were misty with unshed tears.

His father's lips twitched and Chet leaned forward. "Speak to me, Dad," he urged. "Speak to me—please! Tell me which one of 'em downed you! I gotta know."

Jefferson Wade stared at the ceiling, his face working spasmodically. "He snuck up behind me," he answered slowly. "He had his head down against the wind."

"Who was he?" Chet insisted desperately. "Who shot you?"

"Stranger," his father muttered. "Bald headed—a scar on his head like a crooked arrow. Snuck up behind. . . . Must have got Pike Thorpe too. . . Pike, he was flanking me."

So Pike Thorpe, also, had been shot! This news left Chet unmoved. Thorpe was the self-appointed leader of the squatters, a swaggering blusterer. Chet hadn't liked Thorpe, for the man had done much to strain relations between ranchers and nesters. Thorpe, always seeking better land, had fanned the cattlemen's anger by breaking sod at a dozen places.

"Bald headed," Jefferson Wade continued tonelessly in his semi-delirium. "Must have got Pike. . . ."

The words faded as twisted features relaxed. Chet stared, then slowly drew the faded quilt over his father's face.

Crossing the room, he sought the belt, holster and gun that Jefferson Wade had owned for a day, the outfit his father had bought when the nesters learned that they must fight to live in Bigrock Valley.

He buckled on the weapon and it sagged from his narrow hips. He hefted the gun, felt the smoothness of the palm-polished handle. "A bald man with a scar like a crooked arrow," he repeated listlessly. "I'll be looking for him, Dad. From now on. . ." He seated himself beside the bunk again. . . .

MORNING found him still keeping the vigil. The wind had blown itself out, and the sun, peeping above the eastern crest of the valley, promised a golden day. But when Chet busied himself with a shovel beneath a cottonwood that shaded the shack he saw nothing but gloom.

A lettered headboard marked a mound when horsemen rode up hours later to find a slim boy, weighted down with a heavy .44, standing defiantly beside the fresh grave.

The riders were led by a tall man who sat his saddle well. He was about fifty, though his face was unlined. Brown hair with no hint of gray reached to his collar, giving him a leonine appearance. Chet knew him.

Hank Eberle was the owner of the Crossed Rafter, one of the biggest ranches

They halted at the canyon mouth for the scant midday meal, then the slow, arduous ascent began. He could see the doubt and dismay in their faces as they realized how difficult it was going to be to get the wagons up over that boulder-strewn bed. Before an hour was out, men and horses were panting and sweating alike.

And that night, fear lay over the camp like a tangible presence. In the canyon, twilight descended swiftly and early. It was already so dark as to force them to make camp while the sun still showed on the peaks above. Cold air rolled down from the heights in a solidly flowing wave.

As the light died above, a chill, ominous melancholy settled over the immense rock masses. The world was suddenly brooding, sinister, infinitely menacing. And silent. Somehow the silence was worst of all. Against it the noise of movement and voices in the canyon boomed hollowly, startlingly, so that, by instinct, people moved softly and lowered their voices, huddling near each other.

It was broken only once—that absolute silence. Ahead, the weird howl of a timber wolf lifted, died, and lifted again. It was like the voice of Death, which was beckoning them on.

Yet next day, there was a brief return of hopefulness and optimism. They came out into a wooded mountain valley, scantly grown with grass. Here, at sunset, Strang was able to get another elk, and at dawn, a brown bear fell to Red Simmons' carbine.

They started out courageously, but beyond the valley, the only available trail lifted over such a steep and dangerous way that they were more than half inclined to turn back again. Yet Strang drove them on, encouraging and cursing them, throwing his own savage energy into the solution of every difficulty that arose along the way.

The second day from the valley was worse, and there was no game. Feet cut and bleeding, the last of their food in sight, they struggled upward along a ledge that paralleled the top of a great cliff and overlooked deep, tumbled gorge. The scant vegetation seemed to have disappeared entirely, but it was obvious that they were very far from being at the top of the mountain range, obvious that if they kept on, they faced the prospect of days without food. Again, fear and rebellion smouldered along the train.

It was, oddly, Hen Murch who again set things off again, unwittingly and tragically—or rather, it was his wife. That rocky ledge had narrowed, so that there was barely room for a wagon to pass between cliff and precipice. Strang, scouting ahead, had discovered that it widened again. Riding back to tell the others, he encountered the Murch wagon in the lead.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Man Must Lead—Or Die

HEN MURCH was sitting humped on the seat, in his usual posture of apathetic despair, with his wife handling the lines. The woman glared at Strang as he rode up, her lean face venomous. Suddenly, all her pent-up hatred and fear burst through in a screech. "Damn you, you murderin' varmint!" she shrieked, "You're leadin' us farther into hell!"

Her arm drew back, and she sent the blacksnake whip twisting out in a swift savage cut at Strang's face. The lash caught Strang's horse on the neck and the animal reared, pawing wildly. Frightened, the Murch team leaped forward, the horse nearest Strang surging outward toward his team mate.

For a perilous instant, the other animal scrambled on the edge of the precipice. The wagon, leaping forward, struck a rock, bounced, and the rear wheel

slid over the edge. It tipped, slid farther. The panic-stricken team flung themselves into the collars, dragging the wagon, half on and half over.

While Strang watched horrified, the heavy vehicle slewed. The other rear wheel went over. He had a momentary glimpse of the horses fighting vainly to drag that dead weight, and of Hen Murch's pallid face, the features frozen with fear, of the woman's lean figure clinging desperately to the seat while her terror-stricken scream rang hideously on the air. He flung himself out of the saddle in a frenzied, futile effort to reach the bits, help the horses in their scrambling pull.

Then they went over, wagon and team.

Strang stood paralyzed, not daring to look over the ledge, the thin, knifelike scream cutting into his mind, through the still air of the chasm. Thinner, thinner, the scream rose, until, after what seemed an aeon of time, there came the sound of a smash, faint, but unutterably violent, from the rocks five hundred feet below. And then there was only silence.

Strang sat down suddenly, with his face in his hands, not even trying to fight the flood of horror and unreasoning guilt and despair that invaded him.

Dimly, he heard the others come up, heard the people in the next wagon back explaining what had happened. They had seen the whole thing, and unconsciously he noted that their account of it had involved him just enough, with its undertone of bitterness.

Yet Strang was not clearly conscious of any of it until Rafe Head's rasping voice broke through.

"This'll be enough," Head's snarl came. "We'll turn back here!"

Strang looked up then, and got slowly to his feet, as a growl of approval greeted the speech. His nerves were suddenly steady and cold, as though encased in iron. His eyes locked with Head's.

"We go on!" he said, and there was implacable challenge in his voice.

Rafe Head stared at him, with fury in his eyes. "You damn locoed murderer!" he blazed, and stabbed for his holstered gun.

Coldly, Strang shot him before the iron had cleared leather.

The bullet smashed Head backwards, whirling him. His sixgun tipped from the holster and clattered on the rocky floor of the ledge. He sat down suddenly. After a moment, he clutched dazedly at a shoulder from which blood was streaming.

"That's the last shoulder-shootin' I do," Strang ripped out, his voice like ice. "We go on. Get—"

Then something smashed violently against the back of his head. His brain flared into an intensity of white light, shot through with the vague memory of Red Simmons at the right of him when he got up to face Head. He had forgotten to keep the man in sight. Then darkness smashed over him like a breaking wave. . . .

HE CAME to bound hand and foot. The wagon train was still going forward, and he realized that it would have been impossible to turn on that narrow ledge.

When the ledge widened, he heard voices outside the wagon in which he lay. Red Simmons and Bucky Grafton were discussing with some others whether or not to turn here or go on until they hit a better camp site.

Simmons and Grafton wanted to go on, and it was decided that way. Strang realized that they had been accepted as leaders in his place.

His lips twisted scornfully. He inched over to a more comfortable position, oblivious for the moment to anything but the blinding pain in his head.

But that evening, when camp had been

made where the ledge widened and a thin trickle of water came down from the cliff, he sent for Josiah Elder, one of the more solid members of the crowd.

"Watch Simmons and Grafton every minute," he told Elder. "They're damn dangerous."

Elder looked at him with an open scepticism, tinged with scorn. "What makes you say that?"

Strang tried to tell him, but even to his own ears the explanation sounded unconvincing.

The other man did not even bother to comment directly on what Strang had said. He merely looked unbelieving.

That night, Strang observed that either Red or Bucky were somewhere near him all the time. It was evident that they meant to take no chances on his being set free.

One by one, the exhausted company crawled into blankets and fell heavily and audibly asleep. The fire died. Even Red and Bucky appeared to be asleep.

Strang, oppressed by the uselessness of his own staying awake, was having a hard time keeping his eyes from closing. He must have dozed, or when his eyes opened again Simmons and Grafton's blankets were gone from their places. A faint scraping sound behind him tautened his nerves. He was trying to turn when a whisper came in his ear, "It's me, Cal—Jackey. Don't make any noise."

Strang's held breath went out of him in a sigh, and for a moment he felt like laughing at himself for expecting murder from Red Simmons.

A knife cut at his bonds. "I couldn't git here before," Young Jackey Randall whispered, "because them two was allus watchin'."

"Where are they now?" Strang was sitting up, rubbing the circulation back into wrists and ankles.

"They snuck off some 'eres," Jackey barely whispered, "but when they come back you an' me kin take 'em, can't we, Cal? They can't get us down, I reckon!"

Strang's throat was tight with the realization of this kid's blind loyalty, then his mind seized and held the practical aspects of the situation.

"Which way did they go?"

"They separated," Jackey told him rapidly. "Bucky went over toward the hosses. I didn't watch after that. I brought you your gun, Cal. Gosh, but you was fast with that today. I bet. . . ."

A squawk from one of the wagons on the opposite side of the fire cut him. Jackdaw Randall was screaming, "My box—my box! Come back here, you hellion!"

Strang ripped into action. Across the dying fire, Jackdaw was jumping up and down frantically, while another figure darted into the shadows.

Strang raced in that direction. As he ran there was a sudden snorting and drum of stampeding hoofs. The horses were loose and racing through the dark in a compact bunch. Behind them was a mounted figure driving them. Another man was flinging himself into the saddle. A shot split the night and lead zipped viciously past Cal's ear.

"Come an' get it, Strang." It was Red Simmons' snarling voice.

Strang thumbed his sixgun at the dim figure. Simmons shot again and whirled his horse, racing after the others. Strang steadied himself and shot coldly. Simmons swayed in the saddle, threw up his hands and plunged to the ground. His horse galloped on after the bunch.

Cursing savagely, Strang ran forward, passing the still figure of Simmons with scarcely a glance. His mind had gone red with the thought of those lost horses. But after a moment, he turned, raging and helpless, toward camp.

The place was a-buzz with movement, curses, and groans of despair as the crowd realized its loss. Simmons' and Grafton's plan was clear enough now. To get off safely with Jackdaw's gold, they had

stolen the horses to prevent pursuit, and also, as a bit of additional profit. Horses were scarce enough here and the bunch would bring a high price at any settlement. Armed and traveling light, the thieves could be pretty sure of reaching the settlements to the south without trouble. It would be months before any survivors of the party showed up to accuse them—if any ever did show.

When the thought of the crowd reached that point, the sheer ruthless coldbloodedness of the plan became evident. Simmons and Grafton must have known that they were condemning most of the company to death. Afoot and short of food, only the strongest in the party stood any chance of survival.

STRANG stood aside from the crowd, brooding, sardonic, watching their chattering rage turn to despair and fear as the gray dawn drifted down from the peaks. As the light grew, eyes turned to him then, abashed, yet somehow full of accusation and hatred.

It was Keeler Fagg who first made the accusation verbal. Wild-eyed, frantic, cringing behind the others, he cried out: "He done it—Cal Strang! He got us into this!"

Angrily the crowd swung toward Cal. He faced them grimly, scorn written in every line of his body.

"You fools!" he ripped out. "If you hadn't tied me up, this wouldn't have happened. I warned Josiah Elder last night about that pair of skunks. But he wouldn't listen. I've had to fight every inch of the way to keep you from making fools of yourselves. I'm getting tired of it. Suppose you lay off of me, before I decide to go it alone. What do you figure to do now? Lie down here an' die?"

The question brought an uneasy silence, broken finally by Josiah Elder's sullen grumble. "Ain't nothin' to do but try to git back."

Strang laughed harshly. "Git back! Maybe you're forgettin' that trip we had to git this far!"

He stood looking at them, his eyes cold and mocking, then suddenly his manner changed. His lean big-shouldered form straightened, his eyes blazing. For a moment all the savage power and dominance of the man came out to thrust against and subdue them.

"You're goin' on," he thundered. "You're not quittin' now, when we're almost there! We'll take three wagons, and *you'll* pull 'em. Horses! Do you think you can't live without horses? I'll show you that you can. Come on—quit mopin' aroun' like a lot of whipped dogs. We got things to do!"

Maybe if anybody had been able to think of another plan, they might have resisted him then. Maybe the very astonishment engendered by this plan held them hypnotized while his blazing will drove them on. In any event dumbly, muttering and bewildered, they obeyed him. And so the long trek got under weigh again.

It must have been a sight to amaze even the granite cliffs above them—that ragged, gaunted crew of starvelings, those heavy wagons with relays of sweating men in the traces in place of horses and that lean, big-boned figure, inspired by maniacal energy, driving them forward, as a devil might drive the toiling legions of hell.

To all of them, the days which followed merged in an endless nightmare of agony and exhaustion. The food gave out, and no game appeared. The way now was more forbidding than ever, with snow on the ground to freeze their naked and bleeding feet, thin air to torture their gasping lungs.

Then a morning dawned when the ground began to fall away in front of them. It came to them slowly that they had toppled the ridge of the range and were on its western slope, but that realization brought despair rather than hope. For

this country on the other side was as barren and desolate as that which they had traversed.

Looking at it, even Strang's heart misgave him, and the thought came to him for the first time that they were licked, that he had led these people to their deaths.

Almost instantly, he reacted, refused to credit it. Fury filled him, so that he shook with the effort to restrain himself from shaking his raging fists at the indifferent cruel face of the mountains.

Then he was alongside the train again, driving them, trying to infect their growing weakness with the fury of his own determination, trying to keep himself indifferent to the hatred that looked out at him from sunken, tortured eyes.

Ahead of him, a man stumbled in the traces, fell. Strang leaped forward, picked the man up and carried him to the wagon where the women and children rode when they could not walk. Then he returned, jumped into the man's place and shouted encouragement.

Beyond him, in the line, Keeler Fagg whirled, his eyes insane, his snarling mouth showing fanged teeth. "Go where?" he snapped. "Damn you, I've had enough of your bullyin'. I'm stayin' here *and you're stayin' with me.*"

He had gun in his hand, leveled.

"Keeler! Quit it!" Strang's voice ripped out with savage authority. He was too far from the man to reach him before he could shoot.

"Damn you—damn you!" the coward's voice lifted in shriek. His finger tightened on the trigger. Other men had turned snarling. "Kill him—by God, kill him!" someone's voice lifted savagely.

A SLENDER form hurtled toward Fagg—a form that even in that swift motion flowed like water. Fagg's gun blasted, but the bullet snarled over Strang's head. Felicity had hit the madman's arm just as he fired that shot.

The force of her charge knocked Fagg from his feet. His gun slithered away. Instantly Strang was after him. Now, as Fagg came to his feet, raving, he raised the barrel of his gun, and struck once. His assailant went down and lay still.

Blazing-eyed, Strang swung the muzzle towards the others. "Get to your work," he thundered. "From now on, I'll kill the first man that tries to quit!"

Sullen, bluffed, they turned away, put weary shoulders to the traces. Slowly and painfully, the train got into motion again.

But that night, Strang knew that it had been in vain. Unsleeping, because his purpose held to keep them in subjection, he sat with the ultimate coldness of despair in his soul. Clearly and torturingly, the incidents of the journey passed in review, bringing in their visualization, the accumulating sense of ultimate disaster—the desert, and Julie Henderson's death. Her mother's agonized eyes as she called Strang a murderer. The tragic end of the Murchs, the shooting of Rafe Head. Red Simmons' death at his own hands. And now, half the company sick, the rest starving, and no hope in sight.

From the beginning it had been his responsibility. He had never been unwilling to acknowledge it, but now the thought came to him that he really was a murderer. For the first time he saw himself as merely stubborn—a man bent on his own ambition and willing to sacrifice everyone else to it. Sick with self-scorn, he reproached himself with trying to play the leader, with a bull-headed and self-glorifying ambition to lead his people into a mythical promised land which had never had any existence outside his own overweening vanity.

Looking up at the frozen indifference of the stars, he slowly pulled his sixgun from its holster. At least, since he had murdered, he could deal justice. Let them find

him so, in the morning. If any of them won through, then they could remember that what he had made others face he himself had not flinched from trying. . . .

The pistol went to his head, then lowered, as new disgust ripped through him. He had been about to play the quitter, about to take the easy way, avoid starvation and cheat the vengeance of those he had wronged.

A step sounded softly behind him. Felicity was there. He could see the fluid outline of her form as she seated herself silently beside him. The fragrance of her hair was suddenly sweet, intoxicating.

He held his breath, stiffening, then her hand reached out softly to take his, and something broke inside him, as though a dam had burst, letting the despair flow out of him and a strange peace and serenity take its place.

She said nothing. But he knew that his mate had come to him, simply, fully, in his time of need, and knew that no words would ever be necessary between the two.

Afterwards—it seemed to him long afterwards—she said softly, "Sleep. I can rest tomorow." And presently he did, letting his head rest on her breast.

Irrelevantly, he muttered, "I'm sorry about Jackdaw's gold."

Her laugh came, low and tender. "Poor Jackdaw," she said. "There wasn't any gold—at least only a few pieces. The rest of it was junk, brass and odd bits of cheap jewelry he had picked up and liked to pretend were valuable. Don't worry about that. If I had only known. . ."

IN THE morning stiffly, wearily and staggering with weakness, the train got into motion. But Strang no longer drove them, only encouraged them. This day would be the last, then, one by one, they would begin to die. Somehow the knowledge that he would die with them was a comfort to him. He had lived greatly, if only for an hour at the end of his life.

Struggling, soon they came around a bend of the trail and stopped, staring. Before them was a precipice, its ledge running to the left downward, but beyond the precipice edge was a valley. A valley whose lush, incredible greenness stretched far to distant mountains. A valley through which a dozen streams visibly flowed, merging into a lake, sapphire blue set gemlike in the center.

An unbelieving gasp went up from the hollow-cheeked men and women at the cliff's edge. A woman suddenly went to her knees, tears streaming down her face. A man's voice lifted, broken with emotion, "We praise Thee, God."

They were sobbing, crying their thanks and gratitude. Only Strang stood straight, something like a glory and a regret on his face. He had brought them home after all, but at what cost—at what bitter cost!

Then suddenly a woman's hand was on his arm and he looked down into the face face of Myra Henderson. "I wanted to tell you, Cal. It wasn't your fault about Julie—about anything. I let her stay too long in the sun. I have known it but been unable to tell you so. I—we—we thank you, Cal."

It was as though a stone had dissolved in Cal Strang's breast. The lines of his mouth softened, his eyes looked suddenly like those of a man reprieved.

From Myra he turned to Felicity, standing straight and full and strong at his side, knowing, without callousness, that there would be other children—others for Myra, for himself. Knowing that life demands its bitter tolls, but understanding suddenly that man was made to endure, to go always onward.

He looked once at Felicity—a long slow look. Then his body snapped erect. "What are we waitin' for?" he ripped out to the crowd. "Come on! We've got work to do!"

THE END

By Norman A. Fox

Chet tried to steady his gun and then knew black despair. His muscles were far too slow to beat the renegade facing him. . . .

Boothill Pays Double

The loaded gun of his bushwhacked nester father waited on young Chet Wade's hip, for the time when he'd meet the killer. . . . But the burning pang of vengeance slugs would be as nothing to the soul-wracking pain which Chet himself must feel when he fulfilled his grim promise. . . .

THE wind, prophetically dirge-like, sobbed down the length of Big-rock Valley. It wailed dolefully beneath the eaves of Jefferson Wade's shack and probed the walls with icy fingers, but the two inside paid no heed. For Jefferson Wade, nester, trained to the plow and to peace, had a bullet between his shoulders and knew that he was dying.

Chet Wade, his son, knew it too. Crouching beside his father's bunk, the boy was oblivious to everything but a heart-rending grief and a consuming hate.

They had been close, this pair; bound

by blood and the kinship of toil. They had been happy, too; even when the cattlemen who lorded the valley had threatened to evict the nesters and fear had spread its insidious toils among the squatters. Now the growing feeling between the two factions had culminated in an ultimatum from the ranchers: "Get out before sundown—or die!"

Two hours ago Jefferson Wade had taken a gun in his hand. "You wait here, son," he told his boy. "I don't 'spect I'll be gone long. These cowmen are running a bluff, likely."

That had been two hours ago. Chet had found Jeff Wade a hundred yards from the shack, badly wounded, weak from the pain of crawling homeward.

So young Chet waited beside the bunk, praying that his father would find strength to speak before Death's dark wings fluttered close.

Father and son were much alike. At fourteen the boy's stringy body showed signs of developing to the solid bulk of his sire. Both had lean, pleasant faces. Both had butter-colored hair and blue eyes. But now Jefferson Wade's eyes were glazed with pain, and Chet's were misty with unshed tears.

His father's lips twitched and Chet leaned forward. "Speak to me, Dad," he urged. "Speak to me—please! Tell me which one of 'em downed you! I gotta know."

Jefferson Wade stared at the ceiling, his face working spasmodically. "He snuck up behind me," he answered slowly. "He had his head down against the wind."

"Who was he?" Chet insisted desperately. "Who shot you?"

"Stranger," his father muttered. "Bald headed—a scar on his head like a crooked arrow. Snuck up behind. . . . Must have got Pike Thorpe too. . . Pike, he was flanking me."

So Pike Thorpe, also, had been shot! This news left Chet unmoved. Thorpe was the self-appointed leader of the squatters, a swaggering blusterer. Chet hadn't liked Thorpe, for the man had done much to strain relations between ranchers and nesters. Thorpe, always seeking better land, had fanned the cattlemen's anger by breaking sod at a dozen places.

"Bald headed," Jefferson Wade continued tonelessly in his semi-delirium. "Must have got Pike. . . ."

The words faded as twisted features relaxed. Chet stared, then slowly drew the faded quilt over his father's face.

Crossing the room, he sought the belt, holster and gun that Jefferson Wade had owned for a day, the outfit his father had bought when the nesters learned that they must fight to live in Bigrock Valley.

He buckled on the weapon and it sagged from his narrow hips. He hefted the gun, felt the smoothness of the palm-polished handle. "A bald man with a scar like a crooked arrow," he repeated listlessly. "I'll be looking for him, Dad. From now on. . ." He seated himself beside the bunk again. . . .

MORNING found him still keeping the vigil. The wind had blown itself out, and the sun, peeping above the eastern crest of the valley, promised a golden day. But when Chet busied himself with a shovel beneath a cottonwood that shaded the shack he saw nothing but gloom.

A lettered headboard marked a mound when horsemen rode up hours later to find a slim boy, weighted down with a heavy .44, standing defiantly beside the fresh grave.

The riders were led by a tall man who sat his saddle well. He was about fifty, though his face was unlined. Brown hair with no hint of gray reached to his collar, giving him a leonine appearance. Chet knew him.

Hank Eberle was the owner of the Crossed Rafter, one of the biggest ranches

in the valley. The boy's lips curled scornfully and one hand moved to the butt of the .44.

Eberle's eyes drifted from the boy to the grave, then back to Chet. The rancher slowly removed his sombrero.

"Reckon yuh're Jeff Wade's boy," he said. "I'm plumb sorry about what happened."

A sullen fire smouldered in Chet's eyes. So Eberle was sorry! Eberle had probably triggered lead along with the rest of them—and now he was sorry.

"Yeah, I'll bet every damn cattleman in the valley is busting with sorrow," Chet flung at him.

"Son," said Eberle, his tone mild, "I ain't never favored gun-play. I slung lead last night because I'm a rancher and my neighbors decided it was best. Maybe yore dad went gunnin' because the rest of the squatters wanted him to—not because he was hankerin' for blood. When yuh're older yuh'll understand such things. Right now yuh'll have tuh take it or leave it when I say they's nothing personal about the deal. Some of the nesters are dead. Thorpe was wounded—he's been jailed for startin' the fracas. The rest of the squatters left last night. I ain't makin' war on orphaned kids, so I'm asking if yuh'd like to stay and ride for the Crossed Rafter?"

Bitter words burned Chet's lips. He wanted to tell Hank Eberle that he would rather be dead than riding for any rancher. He wanted to shout his hate and defiance. But reason stayed his tongue. He realized his own youth—his own limitations. He couldn't believe that generosity had prompted Eberle's offer, but he did know that refusal would mean banishment from the valley.

Perhaps they would put him in an orphans' home or a reform school. It would be better to stay in the valley at any cost, for somewhere there was a bald man with a crooked scar. What better way to find his father's killer than to be able to mingle with the cowboys, to be one of them?

"I could use a job, at that," he told Eberle.

But when he rode up the valley behind the rancher his heart was burning with hate for his benefactor and all of his kind.

And so it was that Chet Wade, who should have grown to bust sod with a plow, became instead a range rider. The overalls of the nester were traded for the bat-wing chaps, the sombrero and spurs of the cowboy. The homely speech of his father's people became spiced with the idiom of the range.

At first his loneliness for Jefferson Wade was like a poignant sword. And it was then that Chet began to unbend toward one person at the Crossed Rafter, Sue Eberle, Hank's daughter.

When Chet joined the crew she was twelve, a gangling creature, mostly legs, with a freckle-sprinkled face ringed by brown curls. A tom-boy, she nevertheless had two pronounced feminine traits—intuition and tenderness. The first seemed to tell her that the strange boy who never smiled needed friendship, the other prompted her to offer that friendship.

Because Hank Eberle had fathered Sue, Chet soon came to find it hard to hate the rancher. Other factors also tended to alter Chet's feelings. For the same bigness in Eberle that had prompted him to offer a home to the boy became apparent in many ways. Eberle seldom left the ranch house, but when the toil was greatest he was always on hand to ride with his men. And Chet admitted, grudgingly at first, that Eberle would perform any task that he asked of his riders.

Whenever opportunity afforded, Chet practiced with the old .44. Often Sue joined him at his gun-play, watching with a quizzical pucker about her blue eyes as his skill grew. But the passage of time did not bring the event he awaited.

When crews were merged at round-up time he watched for a bald man with a crooked scar. He carried his search to town at the end of the valley, studied men at the schoolhouse dances, and kept alert whenever riders met—but all his efforts were in vain.

When at last he became convinced that the man he sought had left, Chet debated whether to move also. He knew that range riders drifted. A wide-spread search would probably be futile, he decided, but someday the killer might return to the Bigrock. Chet would be waiting for him—and the .44 would be waiting, too.

The crew of the Crossed Rafter soon accepted Chet as one of them. The boy might have asked for information about the bald killer, but he noticed they were careful never to mention that hell-swept night when cattleland had armed against the nesters. At first Chet interpreted their evasion as evidence of an alien feeling toward himself. Later he realized that deference to his feelings had bridled their tongues. So his own question went unasked.

THE years slid by. At twenty Chet rode with the best of them. He had grown taller, taken on added weight. The gun of Jefferson Wade fitted snuggly, no longer bouncing against his hip, no longer sliding.

Sue Eberle had grown, too. At eighteen the girl had become a woman. The freckles were gone, the lath-like figure rounded out. But if Chet Wade sometimes found himself breathless at the change he did not admit the fact, even to himself. While the .44 waited its grim, unfulfilled task, he knew that he could not seriously think of any woman—much less Sue Eberle, who belonged to the Crossed Rafter.

For inwardly Chet Wade still considered himself a sodbuster although the years were gradually shaping him into his new life. What trail he might have eventually chosen he did not know. And it was in his eighth year at the ranch something happened that took the decision out of his hands, shaped his future in the smoke of the .44.

The event really began the day that Slim McLeod of the Crossed Rafter brought news from Bigrock town. Three men had escaped from the state penitentiary—and one of them was Pike Thorpe.

The yarn awoke slumbering memories in Chet Wade as he listened at the bunkhouse. He had almost forgotten Pike Thorpe, who had once been the leader of the nesters. He had known, of course, that the man had been imprisoned for his work on the night of the battle. Resentment had rankled Chet. Why should Pike Thorpe be behind bars while the killer of Jefferson Wade rode free? Not that he had ever cared for Thorpe. Nesters and ranchers might have lived in the valley in peace had it not been for the avarice of the man. Yet Thorpe had been a nester and Chet knew that he should rejoice over his escape.

Listening to the tale of prison-break, Chet had an uncanny feeling that the happening was going to bring his search to an end. The hunch was ridiculous, he knew, for Pike had certainly not been the bald man with the scar. . . . But the feeling persisted.

Hank Eberle heard the news of the escape with a troubled frown. And understanding of that came to Chet when a lean cowboy passed a remark in the bunkhouse.

"Seein' as how Thorpe got sentenced chiefly on account of the Old Man's testimony," the cowboy said, "it 'pears like the boss has got a right to be worried with Pike on the loose."

It was the only reference that any of the hands ever made to the past. A week later the whole thing was forgotten in the stress of the fall round-up.

The range-boss hailed Chet the first afternoon. "Hank's due out here tomorrow to do some tallying," the boy was told. "The way things is shaping I'm needing him today. Will yuh ride in and tell him that?"

Chet turned his cayuse's head toward the ranch house, and that feeling of impending events rode with him as he shortened the miles. It became more acute when he arrived to find that no one replied when he pounded on the ranch house door.

Spurred by his premonition he opened the door, stepped into the Eberle living room. There he stopped as though a bullet had found him.

Havoc reigned in the room. Furniture was overturned, crashed to kindling, rag rugs kicked ruthlessly aside. Many indications shouted that men had struggled here, but among them only one thing rivetted the boy's attention like a hypnotic eye.

It was a hairy object, dirty and unkept from the trampling of many boots. But Chet knew it—knew it now for what it was. A wig—a brown wig—a wig that he had seen on the head of Hank Eberle for many years, and had thought it a part of the man!

Chet ran through the door and leaped into the saddle. He read sign in the yard, proof that horsemen had rode up from the south and returned to the south. Someone had carried off Hank Eberle, and instinctively Chet knew that could only be Pike Thorpe. But another thought drove the boy relentlessly on the trail of the abductors—a thought that kept tune to the shifting gun at his thigh.

Bald men wore wigs. Hank Eberle was bald, had been for years. And Hank Eberle had none of that vanity that prompts men to hide baldness. Hank Eberle would wear a wig for only one reason—to cover some revolting mutilation, such as a scar like a crooked arrow!

SO CHET WADE pounded down the valley on the trail of his father's killer. Showdown lay ahead, but somehow Chet found that the old flame of hate was not fanned by the thought. For years he had waited for such a day, but now pain rode with him.

Then, as he studied the trail, panic reached for Chet Wade with choking fingers. Tracks showed that three horses had moved up from the south. They would probably belong to Pike Thorpe and the two men who had escaped with him. The signs of four riders should have headed back down the valley, for they had obviously taken Hank Eberle along. Instead *five* sets of hoofmarks pointed the way south.

Where was Sue Eberle? Was she in Bigrock town, riding the range—or a prisoner with her father? The last thought chilled him. As he pictured her peril Chet knew that he cared more for Sue Eberle than any living person—yet he had taken this trail to kill Sue Eberle's father.

Conflicting emotions tore at Chet Wade, were goading him when he sighted a familiar building ahead. It was the old shack that Jefferson Wade had built so long ago. Sun and blizzard and neglect had taken their toll, made it more ramshackle than ever. Five horses were hitched to the cottonwood that sheltered his father's grave. Two of them wore Crossed Rafter brands. Chet had reached trail's end!

Tempering his haste with caution, Chet dismounted, crept to a window and peered inside. He glimpsed a portion of the room, and saw Sue sitting on the bunk, her arms lashed to her sides. Hank Eberle sat beside her, untied—Hank Eberle with his bald head marked with a scar like a crooked arrow. Stripped of his false hair the man looked different. He had fooled Jefferson Wade on that long-ago night, but Chet Wade knew him.

The sight made him heedless of the fact

that the three riders must be nearby. Racing for the door, he hurled himself inside. Sue shrieked once—a warning. Then the door banged shut behind the boy and three men stepped into view. Two were strangers to Chet, evil-faced men who leered triumphantly. But the third man was Pike Thorpe and the one-time nester held a leveled gun in his hand, straight at Chet Wade.

The years had done things to Pike Thorpe. He was thinner and his skin showed the pallor of prison, but the old arrogant thrust of the chin was the same, the burning black-browed eyes unchanged. He stared at Chet malevolently, a grin twisting his slash of a mouth, until recognition sagged his jaw.

"I thought I was seein' a ghost," he breathed. "It's old Jeff Wade's boy—still on the place."

"That's right, Thorpe," Chet said tonelessly.

"Thought the old shack was deserted," Thorpe said. "We been hiding out here for a few days. Hope you don't mind."

"Stow that talk," Chet told him. "What's your play, Pike?"

Thorpe still held the gun. "I busted outa Deer Lodge," he said. "I come back here to settle a score with yon polecat on the bunk. When we saw you headin' this way we figgered you might be one of his cowpokes, so we laid a little trap. Here's my cards, Wade: I aim to finish off Eberle before I leave, but I aim to take my time doing the job. Any objections?"

It was a challenge, and Chet hesitated before replying. He knew he should tell Thorpe that Hank Eberle had shot down Jefferson Wade. He knew he should insist that it was his privilege to kill his own father's murderer. But—did he want to kill Hank Eberle?

Sue was watching him from across the room, her eyes big with terror—Sue would be an orphan if Thorpe killed Hank Eberle, and Chet knew the hell of being an orphan. Yet he had planned to do that to Sue, whose kindness had lighted the dark days after Jefferson Wade's killing.

THEN Thorpe's voice cut into his thoughts, took the decision from him. "I gotta lot of lost time to make up," the big man said. "They's things to do, and the first one is to work over that testifying skunk a-sittin' there. Afterwards you can ride with us if you want to, Wade. We'll be taking the girl along, but if you're a son of your old man, you ain't gonna care what happens to a rancher—or to a rancher's daughter!"

Chet stared at him, his eyes smouldering. He wanted to call the man a liar. Jefferson Wade had never made war on women. Jefferson Wade had loved peace, but he would have killed any man who menaced a girl like Sue Eberle.

"Here's your answer, Pike," Chet said listlessly. One arm swung upward with the force of an explosion and his bunched knuckles crashed against Thorpe's jaw. His apathy had momentarily caught the convict off guard. Thorpe dropped to the floor, but his gun was spitting hot lead as he went down.

It seemed to Chet that a sheet of flame had been flung into his face. The gun's roar hammered against his ears and hot pain speared through his left shoulder. Through a haze of smoke he saw the other two renegades diving for holstered guns and then the .44 that had belonged to Jefferson Wade was in his hand, shooting.

Prison years had slowed these men's gun-speed, but there were two of them. Chet dropped one before the fellow had cleared leather. With the gun bucking in his hand he felt the second man's lead sear his right side. Fighting the hot nauseating pain, Chet eared back the hammer, aimed for the man's vest and shot him.

Chet's left arm hung limp at his side as he reeled drunkenly on his feet, brushing his eyes with the hand that gripped

the gun. He sensed vaguely that Pike Thorpe was scrambling to his feet. Chet tried to steady his gun, and then knew black despair. His muscles obeyed—but far too slowly to beat this last foe.

Then Thorpe was on his feet, his mouth twisted in an evil grin, his finger tensed on the trigger. Dizziness swept Chet like a blinding wave. He saw Thorpe lurch awkwardly, heard the roar of the enemy's gun, and squeezed the trigger of his own .44. He knew that he had killed the man. In the same instant he realized that Hank Eberle had come to his feet and had hurled a stool to spoil the convict's aim.

Chet knew that stool. He had crouched on it long ago, watched Jefferson Wade die. Without a backward glance he staggered from the cabin. A breeze from the hills struck his face, steadied his footsteps as he lurched toward the cottonwood to pause beside the leaf-strewn mound.

He had found the bald man with the crooked scar—and he had let him live! He would never kill Hank Eberle, he knew. Something greater than his desire for vengeance would always stay his hand.

But he owed something to the memory of Jefferson Wade, too; and because that debt was unpaid, Chet knew he could never again ride for the man who had shot down his father. He'd leave the valley. Maybe someplace he could find a piece of land for himself and be a sod-buster like Jefferson Wade. He'd miss a lot of things he'd found at the Crossed Rafter, but. . . .

He whirled as a hand touched his shoulder. He realized that Hank Eberle was beside him, and Sue.

"We'll be taking you home, Sue and I," the old rancher said. "I'll have some of the boys bring a wagon to haul Pike and those two away. I reckon you wouldn't want 'em planted near yore dad."

"Maybe dad wouldn't mind," Chet said bitterly. "Pike was a nester, too. He was my kind of people—once."

Hank Eberle gnawed his lip silently. "They's something I should have told you, long ago," he said at last, "but I thought yuh'd work the poison out of yore system in yore own way. Pike Thorpe killed yore dad, son."

"Pike Thorpe!" Chet repeated dully.

"I SAW it," Eberle interjected. "I was flanking the nesters that night and the fight was shore goin' their way for awhile. I had my hat shot away and my wig with it, and I clumb off my cayuse to look for that dang wig. Thorpe was moving ahead of me and not far behind yore dad. Then old Jeff took a look over his shoulder and saw me coming. It was about the last thing he saw, 'cause Thorpe shot him in the back when yore dad turned. Pike didn't know I was around and I kept my mouth buttoned afterwards, but that was one reason that I helped send Pike to prison . . . . And now you've killed him."

And Chet, listening, knew that he was hearing the truth. He remembered that Pike Thorpe had been jealous of his neighbors' land—including the piece of soil that Jefferson Wade had farmed. Jefferson Wade had said that two men had been behind him that night, Pike Thorpe and a bald man with a crooked scar—and Wade had died without knowing which had truly been his enemy.

Chet Wade slowly unbuckled the gun belt from about his hips. Though the effort cost him pain he looped it over a low-hanging branch above the grave of Jefferson Wade. Then he moved toward his horse while Hank Eberle supported him on one side and Sue on the other.

He smiled into the girl's eyes as she steadied him. "You'll have to patch me up in a hurry, Sue," he told her. We're rounding up beef on the Crossed Rafter. And we're needin' whole-skinned cowpokes these days!"

BLIZZARD FUGITIVE

By Charles H. McDermott

Flash shifted, circling for a sure shot.

With prison's gray-walls closing in, Big John Tallman held a burning hatred no grave could smother for the two men who had sent him there. Then on a black night of swirling, blizzard snows, he raised up his guns once more—to face with honor a grim and hopeless task that must bring death.

BIG JOHN TALLMAN was dying. He'd known it for a long time now—a year, to be exact. It had been just such a day as this, too—that Doctor Reed, Deer Lodge's soft-spoken little medico, had hinted as much to him. Bleak and murky, a marrow-chilling gale had been shoving down off the mountains, slashing wickedly through the lowering clouds and ripping out flurries of dry, flinty snow.

Perhaps that was why Big John had not seen Reed as the little medico headed across the prison yard toward him. Or maybe it had been because the powdery gray dust from the rock crusher was making him cough again.

"There are teeth in that wind, John," Reed had said, looming up toward him like a white phantom. "It looks like we're in for an early freeze."

Big John nodded, wondering what had brought the little medico out of his warm office. For a moment, while Reed stood shaking the snow from the collar of his greatcoat, he stared at the doctor, trying to see behind those bland, analytical eyes. Then a ball of fire seemed to explode in his chest. Searing and choking, it tore the breath from his tortured lungs. His gaunt frame rocked with the dreadful cough he'd learned to fear.

"Had that cough quite a while, haven't you," Reed said, and the professional glimmer in his eyes tripped a warning signal in Big John's brain.

"Worst cold I ever dabbed a loop on," he admitted. "I been tryin' tuh shake 'er all summer, but she hangs tighter'n spots on a paint hoss."

The next morning Big John was surprised when they took him off the rock crusher and assigned him to Doctor Reed's office. His heart warmed toward the little medico, but in a way he regretted the change. The transfer served to strengthen his hunch that Reed diagnosed his cough as serious.

Returning from the cell block one afternoon, Big John heard Warden Greer's gruff tones coming from Reed's office. He had no intention of eavesdropping, but Reed and the warden were speaking loud and heatedly, and their words carried distinctly through the thin boards.

"He's served more than ten years, Jeff," Reed was saying. "It should have been Flash Fargo and Butch Cordash. You know that as well as I do. Tallman was only their goat."

Big John gasped. Reed and the warden were talking about him!

"But it's not my job to judge degree o' guilt," Warden Greer argued. "They sent Tallman here, not me. My job's to keep him locked up till they say turn him loose. Just 'cause the ol' fossil gets a touch o' cold, I ain't runnin' to the Governor to get him pardoned."

"Tallman's case isn't a cold, Jeff. He'll be dead a year from now."

"Yeah. An' men o' his stripe have tore the hinges off the gates o' hell in less time than that."

Big John felt cold fingers clutching his heart. They hadn't told him. He had less than a year to live!

THERE were days after that when Big John cursed himself for ever accepting Reed's generosity. For one thing, his light duties gave him too much time to think, and he brooded more than was good for him.

For ten hell-packed years he'd endured the iron-fisted discipline of prison life, fretting under the yoke, but keeping the fires of revenge in his heart dampered with the thought that some day he'd be free. Some day he'd be free to call a showdown with Flash Fargo and Butch!

Once he had been putty in their experienced hands. It was all plain in his mind now. He'd been caught in a tight, with less than three hundred dollars with which to meet a note for three thousand. He'd tried to borrow from his neighboring ranchers, his friends, anybody, but without success. Desperate, he'd gone to the Double Ante Saloon, and staked his three hundred against Flash Fargo's nimble fingers.

The gambler had broken him in a couple of hands. Then Flash had called him into the back room, told him about the thirty thousand dollars in the express office—bar gold being shipped out from the Colima Mines.

"You won't be takin' much risk," Flash had said. "Me an' Butch will be masked. All you got to do is tend the horses and see that no one Injuns-up on us."

Big John had swallowed their bait. He'd waited in front with three horses while the crooked gambler and Butch went in and looted the express office, then shot the clerk dead. That shot had been a signal for red hell to tear loose. Fighting to keep the horses from bolting, Big John hadn't heard Sheriff Ashton slip up behind him.

Not until his trial did he learn he'd been neatly taken in; that Flash and Butch had had fast horses cached in the rear of the express office all the while he'd been posed in front with decoys. They'd ridden away, leaving him to suffer the irate backwash of their diabolical scheming.

For ten years that sore had festered in Big John's breast, eating into his heart

until only thoughts of the showdown to come, could lessen the burning pain. Now he knew that even this was to be denied him. The knowledge filled his whole soul with bitterness. He was grateful to Reed for trying to get Warden Greer to exert his influence in gaining him a pardon. But he was glad that Greer had refused the little medico's request. For then he'd be bound to keep the peace which Reed insisted he must, if released. He wouldn't be able to hunt down that pair of double-dealing coyotes.

And then, there was Sunny—the warden's six-year-old son. Sunny had taken a fancy to Big John. He liked to come and sit with the oldster in Reed's office. Big John liked the boy. He liked his thicket of unruly curls that glinted like wire-gold, and the laughter that bubbled deep in his innocent blue eyes.

Sunny would sit at the prisoner's feet and listen while Big John spun tales. They intrigued the youngster. Big John would tell him of brave, fighting men, and of miraculous deeds performed in the white heat of passion; tales of strong, simple men to whom the code of the range is an unwritten decalogue.

Then, just as Big John was becoming accustomed to this new existence, fate had dealt him a second blow. Flash Fargo and Butch were caught cold in a hold-up. Big John cursed roundly the day they came through the big iron gate.

Flash and Butch couldn't see the hate boiling in Big John's red, burning eyes. Nor did they know that Doctor Reed had befriended him, and exacted his pledge that he would not betray the confidence placed in him.

After that Big John had drawn back into a brooding shell. His lean, bony face hardened like a frozen mask, hiding the swirling cross-currents at play within him. Only on rare occasions, such as those when Sunny would come to plague him for another story, would it soften with something of its old friendliness.

That was how it had all been. Then, last night, he'd heard the whisperings along the prison grapevine—whispers that made his heart pound joyously and sent his blood racing riotously through his veins. Flash Fargo and Butch were crashing out. Today!

AS BIG John stood staring through the window in Reed's office, watching the skirling snow curtain the prison yard just as it had that day a year ago when Reed had stopped at the rock crusher to talk with him, he knew Flash Fargo and Butch would be gone before many minutes.

Something seemed to whisper to Big John that Fate had been kind, after all. He was still alive—even though a year ago Reed had predicted he wouldn't last the year out. Big John smiled. He couldn't tell why he was so certain that a showdown with Flash and Butch loomed near, but somehow he knew. And he was content to sit and watch through the window, listening to the wind, watching the snow lash the glass in slashing blasts.

Abruptly it came—the long piercing wail of a siren that lifted its shrill crescendo quickly above the howling wind. Flash Fargo and Butch were out!

Big John knew they had planned it well. Horses would be waiting near the prison. The blizzard would baffle pursuit. They would win through. So Big John felt a great calm soothing his pounding heart, and he went about his duties with light spirits.

It was growing dark when he saw Warden Greer and Reed pointing the tired, half-frozen posse into the prison. Greer's shoulders dropped dejectedly, and he vanished quickly into his residence. Reed came on toward his office. At first Big John thought it was the bitter bite of the cutting wind which made

the little medico's face so ghastly pale.

"No luck, eh, doc?" he asked.

"No. No luck," Reed echoed in a dead voice. "And the kid will freeze before they get twenty miles."

Big John suddenly felt as though a giant fist were squeezing his heart. "The —the kid?" he faltered. "Not—you don't mean Sunny?" He had Reed by the shoulders, shaking the little doctor like a chaparral cock shakes a rattler.

Reed twisted out of the vise-like grip. "Hold up, John. I thought you knew. They grabbed Sunny and used him for a shield when they crashed out. Unless they're rounded up quickly, the kid's chances—"

"Chances!" fired Big John hotly. "Yuh talk of chances. Those hydrophobia skunks wouldn't give a winded hoss a chance. We've got to do something!"

Queer shadows played in Reed's eyes. "Yes. We've got to do something," he repeated. Then: "Where would they most likely head for?"

"Flat Head Pass, then 'cross the Snow Mountains an' down into the Jackson Hole country."

"You used to know those secluded spots pretty well, didn't you?" Reed asked cryptically. Then he did a funny thing. He removed his coat, unstrapped the brace of big black Colts from around his waist and laid them on the desk-top. He walked to the door, looked back at Big John. "I forgot to tell you," he said tonelessly. "Sunny was coming over here to see you when they grabbed him."

Big John stared at the door after Reed had disappeared. Then he went over to the desk and lifted the heavy Colts from their holsters, made certain they were loaded.

The guard at the gate was used to seeing Big John walking about the prison yard. He wasn't suspicious as the prisoner came up to the gate. Big John smiled, reached beneath his coat and yanked out one of Reed's big black Colts. The guard's eyes popped out. Then he recovered, and started to raise his short carbine.

"Don't try it, fella!" barked Big John. "Just unscrew that gate 'fore this smoke-pole starts speakin' yore funeral piece!"

One look into Big John's eyes and the guard complied. Big John leaped through the open gate like a springing cougar. His sixgun flashed in a short arc, thudded dully against the guard's skull. Then Big John was sprinting for the wooded sink a half-mile distant.

Before he reached the trees the shrill challenge of the prison siren reached out behind him. Stolidly he floundered on. Already his breath came in labored gasps. He breathed a fervent prayer that he had not guessed wrong. Then he crashed through the thick foliage and stopped short.

There in the trees stood Reed's great golden sorrel. Big John laughed then, and settled into the saddle. For the first time in ten years he was thrilling to the feel of good horseflesh between his legs.

BACK at the prison, Warden Greer's bull-like voice banged the walls of Reed's little office. "You know who that's for?" he bellowed, shaking a fist toward the wailing siren. "Big John Tallman! The man you said should be pardoned. The lead-slingin' killer you owned would be dead 'fore this. Those three with my boy! Gawd!"

"Shut up," Reed snapped. "You're not saving your kid's life by braying around like a damned jackass." The medico drew a deep breath, then plunged. "I helped Big John escape."

"You?" Greer gasped.

"I left my guns on the desk, my sorrel in the woods. You saw what happened when we tried trailing those other two bravos. What chance do you think we'd ever have of finding them. But Big John

knows where they'll head for. And he's only minutes ahead of us. Now move, and pray to God that we won't be too late!"

As they came out of the trees and the wind lulled briefly, they could see Big John a scant half-mile ahead. Later the trailing grew more difficult, but never did they lose track of him as he threaded his way through the mountains.

Several times Big John had the feeling that he was being followed. Once he stopped in the lee of a high cutbank, but there was no sound except the wind soughing through the trees. He didn't mind being trailed—so long as his pursuers didn't overhaul him until after he had reached a certain tiny cabin hidden in the fastness of those mountains ahead.

As he climbed higher into the hills, the air got thinner. It irritated his lungs. He'd cough so violently that the swells rolled dizzily before his eyes and his breath froze to his muffler. At this altitude, too, the whole world was carpeted with a deceptive white blanket. It was dangerous going. At any moment horse and rider might go floundering over the lips of a canyon, or into the maw of a deep wash.

After a time it stopped snowing and a wan sickle moon peeped timidly above the saw-toothed ridges. Just ahead, the twin spires of Bear Notch thrust upward, limned sharply against the gray skyline. Beyond, Big John knew, was the hidden canyon where Flash and Butch would hole up until ready for their long trek into the Jackson Hole country.

Big John wasn't cold now. But he was a little stiff. So, as he approached the concealed pass, he practiced sliding his guns from their well-oiled holsters. He groaned at the agonizing slowness of his rough, callused hands. Those hands had once matched gunswift with the best.

Topping the last hundred yards, the sorrel nickered, lifted its head. From the blackness floated a challenge:

"Claw high, stranger! Don't make no move t'ward those smoke-wagons."

Big John's hands shot skyward. "Kinda nervous, ain't yuh, Butch?"

His familiar tone drew a startled gasp from the hidden gunman, and then a dark blot lifted out of the deeper shadows. "Damn my whiskers," Butch growled. "How the hell did yuh peel those walls off'n yore back?"

"Sixteen kinds uh hell busted loose after yuh an' Flash took the wind out uh there. I grabbed my chance an' vamosed, pronto. I've had tough goin', too. My teeth's been rattlin' like Spick castanets an' my belly's done swallered my backbone. But I reckoned I'd ketch yuh all here. I knowed I'd be good fer muckamuck an' a little shut-eye."

Butch glowered, fingering the trigger of his rifle, and Big John felt cold perspiration wrap him like a wet blanket. But he managed to withstand that evil scrutiny.

Abruptly Butch wheeled and led the way through the bottle-neck pass.

Past the brush which effectively concealed the narrow slash in the rocky walls. the trail dropped steeply and widened into a saucer-like compound, edged by a wide, thicketed ledge. Bright moonlight flooded the clearing, revealing the log shack that squatted in the center. Yellow lamplight was pouring through the shack's single window.

BIG JOHN stifled the impulse to hurry as he followed Butch up to the cabin. Butch jerked the latchstring, went in. Flash Fargo was kneeling over an iron kettle that was suspended in the open fireplace. He jerked erect as Butch came in. His jaw dropped as he saw Big John's form blocking the doorway.

"Howdy, Flash," greeted Big John affably. "Like old times again, huh?"

The gambler's teeth snapped audibly. He smiled with his lips, but his eyes re-

mained cold as death. "Didn't hardly expect you to swap that cushy job for our company," he said.

"No?"

"Bobtail yore lip," Butch glowered. "With two escapes the same day, these hills are goin' tuh start sproutin' lawhounds like jacks in a mesquite patch. We can't afford tuh lay over like we planned." He glared at Big John.

But Big John wasn't watching the glowering killer. His glance was searching the cabin for something else. As though reading the purpose behind those shifting eyes, Flash jerked a thumb toward one of the peeled-pole bunks constructed against the wall.

"The brat's plumb tuckered out," he smirked. "He'd never make Flat Head."

The color drained from Big John's face. He understood full well the import of those words.

"Yo're out uh yore head," he said bleakly. "Yuh—yuh couldn't kill Sunny."

"No, I couldn't—not unless I had to. But Butch, now—he forgets little things like that easy."

A grin warped Butch's thick lips. "Yeah, leave the brat tuh me!"

Murder flared in Big John's heart. "That's not necessary," he argued. "We can leave the younker here in the shack with plenty uh grub. He'll manage."

Flash answered with a withering stare. "I'm not takin' orders," he snarled. "I'm givin' 'em! We need all the grub we got to make Flat Head."

A red haze misted Big John's eyes, and his pulses hammered with the urge to kill. But he smiled.

"Since that's settled," he said thinly, "I reckon I can stand a mite uh that stew simmerin' in the kettle."

"It's not ready yet," Flash grunted. "You get out to the pass, just in case someone tries to Injun-up on us. I'll send Butch out to call you as soon as it's ready."

But the gambler's about-face didn't fool Big John, though he did turn and go out, slamming the door hard. He knew Flash and Butch too well, not to know exactly what their next play would be.

After the door slammed, Flash whirled angrily on his partner. "You blamed fool! Why didn't you drill that meddlin' old buzzard 'stead of hazin' him in here?"

"How'd I know he wasn't bein' tailed," Butch growled. "Do yuh think I wanted tuh draw a passel uh lawdogs yappin' around our necks. We can tend tuh him an' the brat whenever we're ready."

"That's your chore right now," Flash said. "An' you better use that frog-sticker I saw you honin'. It don't make any noise. We're draggin' our freight right now. Somethin' tells me the law ain't far behind that old fool. I'll fix the warden's brat while you're takin' care of that long-geared skeleton. Now get movin'!"

Butch scowled and went out. He circled the cabin, climbed to the low ledge which rimmed the canyon and edged into the protective brush that swept upward toward the pass. He stopped as he caught the keen aroma of burning tobacco. Limned against the skyline, in the black darkness, he could see a dim silhouette.

Butch's eyes sparkled. He ripped a long, razor-keen knife from its sheath and leaped, plunging the blade again and again into the soft, yielding form.

BACK on the rock-ribbed trail that lifted sharply upward into the wooded gorge, Reed and the warden climbed stiffly from saddle and crept forward. Their breath beat back hot in their faces as they bellied down, striving to pierce the ink-black shadows. Another hour would see the moon washing those shadows with its gray light, but Reed had no intention of waiting until then.

Inch by inch they wormed upward over the frozen ground, until their eyes lifted above the lip of the ridge. Below, gray

moonlight splotched the canyon floor, throwing the cabin into sharp relief.

Reed's heart hammered against his ribs, filled his body with a warm tingling. Greer's palm was perspiring freely, making the sixgun butt slippery in his grasp.

"They must all be down there in the shack," Reed whispered.

Warden Greer nodded and raised to his feet. He hesitated until he saw the wooded bench that circled the canyon wall, then he slipped forward into its dark folds. Reed flitted behind like a shadow.

They stopped as light sprayed suddenly from the cabin door. Big John came out, walking swiftly toward the pass.

"Somethin' damn queer goin' on down there," Greer growled, as he watched the escaped outlaw shed coat and hat. "Look. He's makin' a dummy out o' those clothes. He's even stickin' a lit cigarette in a slit he's cut in the coat."

Reed's warning hiss drew Greer's eyes back toward the cabin. Butch was slipping from the shack now, and making directly for the spot where they lay.

Butch passed within arm's-length of the two hidden men, walking with the stealth of a stalking puma. Moonlight glinted briefly on something in his hand.

Greer felt a cold wave of rage roll over him as he saw the stalking killer raise his knife, plunge it into the bulky form.

Butch whirled, swearing roundly as his slow brain registered that he'd been neatly tricked. His eyes searched the gloom, probing frantically. A mocking chuckle floated out of the brush at his back. Then Big John stepped out into the moonlight.

"Pray, you back-stabbin' skunk!" snarled Big John. "Ten years has been a long time to wait. But it's been worth it!"

Snarling like a cornered animal, Butch sprang—straight into the roaring flame that belched from Big John's sixes.

The throaty blare of the .45's banged against the canyon walls, caromed off and came bouncing back like giant claps of thunder. The cabin door flew open and a squirming ball of fury flashed through.

"Sunny!" Greer shouted, springing up. "It's Sunny. Thank God!"

THE youngster's chubby legs were propelling him toward the pass, but Flash streaked through the door, overhauled the tow-headed tot and brushed him aside.

Greer drew a quick bead on the gambler's back. Then a groan burst from his lips and he lowered his gun. Sunny had stopped directly in the line of fire.

Flash jerked to a stop as he saw Big John break from the shadows and stalk forward with slow, measured stride. Reed cursed softly when he noted the oldster's guns in their holsters.

"Yore calculations kinda misfired this time," Big John taunted. "You thought I swallered yore *habla* like a green pilgrim, huh? But one dose uh yore brand uh skunk oil cured me. You ain't forgot ten years ago, have yuh, Flash?"

The gambler laughed.

"You should have stayed in your own corral," he sneered. "Your nosy meddlin' has bought you a ticket for hell!"

"No," Big John corrected patiently. "You're the one who's bought a ticket fer hell. Ten years ago when yuh framed me into that express killin', they 'lowed I was guilty as the wolf-trackin' son who pulled the trigger. So I took my medicine without squawkin'. But you, tinhorn, yo're yellow tuh the core. Yo're the kind uh skunk who'd use an innocent kid to ease out of a tight. Yo're not worth the taller tuh slide yuh into hell's fires. Once in a man's lifetime, the hour comes to tally up. Here it is!"

"Why you mealy-mouth old mossback," Flash snarled. "Sure we framed you—and did a sweatin' good job of it, too!" Suddenly, his body went tense.

"Take it, sucker!" he ripped out.

Big John sighed softly, pawed for his

guns. But Flash's gun cleared the lip of his holster before Big John's six-shooters.

Flame flowered from the gambler's gun, and Big John felt molten lava sear into his chest. He held his feet while his Colts cleared leather and leveled.

The gambler's hate-twisted face settled in his sights and Big John's fingers squeezed—then froze. Sunny had stopped behind the gambler! Big John heard Warden Greer's bull-like voice.

"Shoot, you blamed fool! Shoot!"

Big John shook his head confusedly. Couldn't Greer see that Sunny was in his line of fire, even as he was in Greer's. Then again the shocking impact of hot lead told him he was hit. Flash was fanning his gun desperately now, but Big John didn't feel any pain. The gambler's weaving form had become a difficult target before his eyes.

Then Flash shifted, circling for a sure shot. Slowly, deliberately, as was his way, Big John raised his big Colts, and a blue-rimmed spot appeared suddenly on the gambler's forehead.

A great drumming roared in Big John's head. He coughed once, felt something hot and thick gushing from his mouth. Then, he crashed forward.

Greer was sobbing like a grief-crazed woman as he rushed toward him. "The brave damn fool," he cried, cradling Big John's blood-smeared head in his lap. "Reed! Reed, do something. We can't let him die!"

Reed's eyes glowed strangely. "He's not dying, Jeff," he answered him. "Big John died ten years ago—back in that hell-hole you and I work in. Don't you see? He'd not dying—he's riding on—to Glory!"

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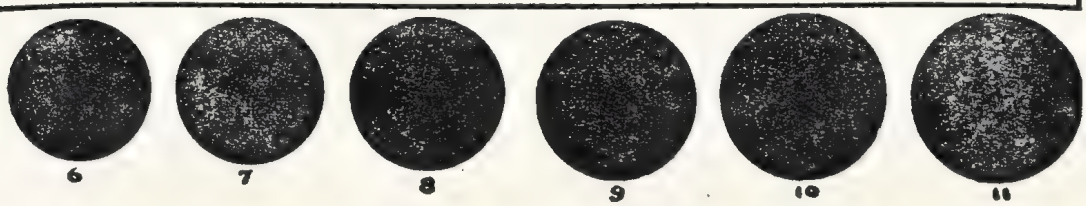
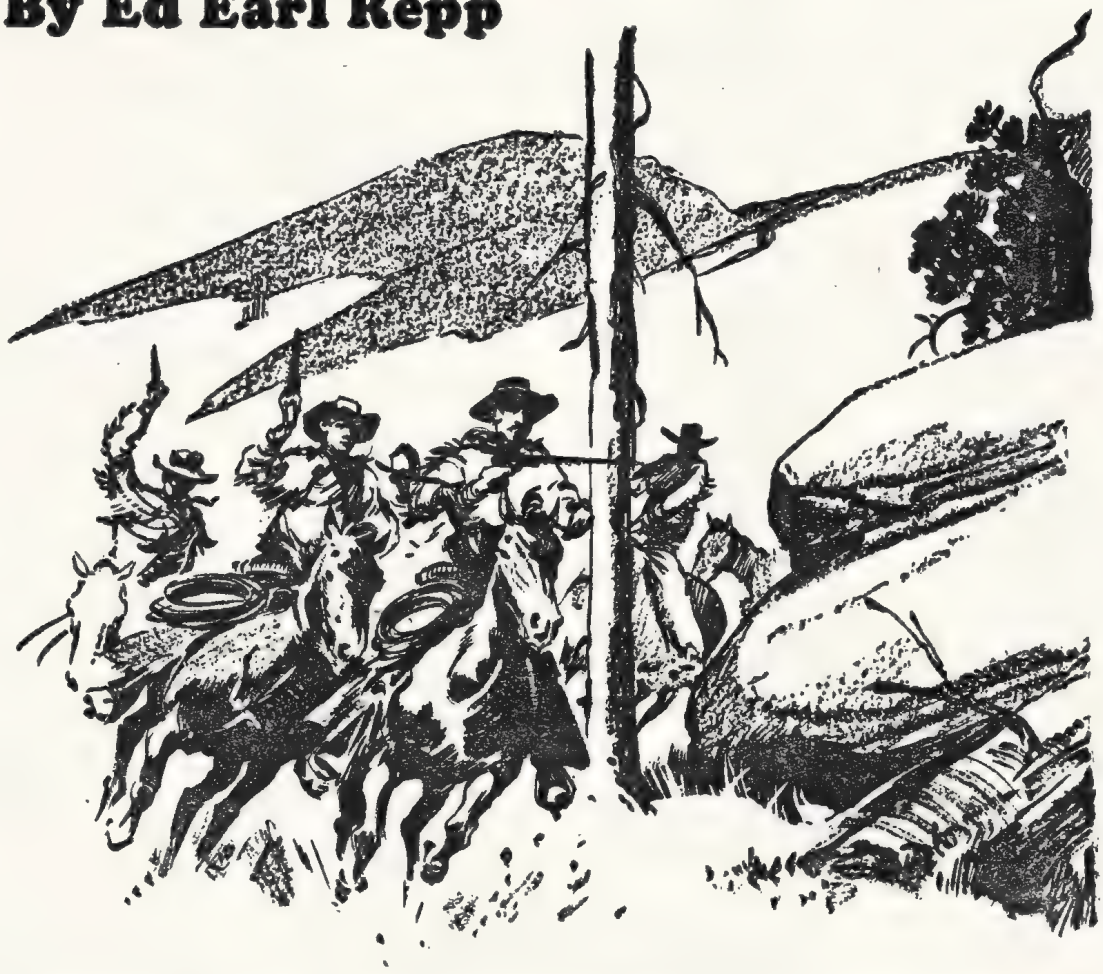


An Orphan Rides the

By Ed Earl Repp



Ghosts of men he had sent to unmarked graves rode stirrup-to-stirrup with the Panther Kid, making of him a cringing, broken shell of a man. . . . Yet, once more he must take up the guns he hated—to side in his fiercest battle the grim buckskin man who had marked him for wilderness death!

LACING the scarps of the Rockies from the Cimarrons to the Canuck Glaciers, the trails of the fur brigade wove through the high country from scattered posts along the white-capped rivers.

It was a hard life along these wilderness roads. Men grew old and died in a single year working the beaver streams. Only the link-steel and whang-leather veterans could survive the hardships of blizzards and freezes, and the constant threat of Arapahoe, Apache and Gros Ventre.

Only at late spring rendezvous did tension relax. Then the long-haired, thin-shanked trappers would shake free of their habitual vigilance to gather around kegs of Bitterroot whiskey and spin trail windies; to toast chiefs with many daughters; to challenge friends from far countries to extravagant games of chance and skill. And it was at these rendezvous, well-nigh impregnable fortresses, that the web of the Buckskin Brotherhood was drawn tight.

Here were gathered friends and foes alike. Occasional newcomers to the wil-

Blood-Feud Trails

Thrill-packed novelette of an outcasts fight for manhood

The renegades were taking after him, firing as they rode. . . .

derness were appraised with cynical eyes and opinions as to how long they might last. For a fortnight in early June, the trading posts were gay with a year of pent-up fun. And at St. Vrain's it was a rendezvous with foofaraw and fluff.

In the low-ceilinged assembly hall of this far-flung post was gathered the annual membership of the mid-mountain trails. Velesquez and Rimadon from Muddy Gap; the mysterious Panther Kid; the Bear and three of his braves from the Uncompahgre; young Beckwourth, the mulatto; Grosjean, Maté and Harroyan from South Park; dour Jim Bridger and his Snake River crew . . . and towering above them all, the giant of the beaver trails, Big Bill Betterige.

There was something about Big Bill that attracted the Panther Kid—something that, at the same time, sent a gripping chill through him. Among the countless stains which blackened the velvet softness of Big Bill's buckskins were the stiff blots of blood long dried. About the big trapper's bony hips a half-dozen

Apache coups hung by braided hair, and in his eyes flamed the golden, steel-shot light of the fearless. Admiration surged through the Kid, dampened again by that tight-gripping chill.

The Panther Kid downed a glass of raw liquor in his hand as though it was a poison potion which might end for him the throttling grip of that chill for all time. He knew that Big Bill fanned that cold, wavering flame within him, and he cursed softly into the whiskey-glass. For the Panther Kid, fully as tall as Big Bill himself, younger by a score of years, and the biggest man in the fur country, was yellow.

From the big pit in the compound outside, Indian women brought in the carcass of a young buck, fresh-killed and slow-roasted over the fire. It was placed in the center of the table, and a dozen long knives worked busily for moments until each of the brotherhood had carved a huge chunk for himself.

Talk dropped to a murmur while they ate, and Har-ona, the Panther Kid, was the most silent of all. Big Bill Betterige and his men were but just arrived at St. Vrain's, and the Kid more than once, caught the eyes of the huge trapper measuring him speculatively. As for the rest, most of them knew the story of this yellow-headed Kid from the Apache country and the weakness within him which barred him from their company.

The Kid ate alone, his ears attuned to every word within the room, for he was impatient to be gone from the Platte Valley, gone from the blue shadows of the mountains. Sick with himself, he listened for word of a party eastbound to the river towns and the softer life of the East. There he might make a new beginning, forget this land where a man lived by his ability to dodge death or to deal it to others, where even the nature of the country itself demanded nerves of whipcord and steel.

TALK again rose in the room as the meal was finished, and dimly the Kid heard a raucous voice call for a game of 'skinner'. The old chill swept the kid as a chorus of assent met the proposal. He rose to his feet and with the graceful, rippling stride that had gained him the name of the Panther among the Arapahoes, he headed for the door. Almost to the portal, a huge hand gripped his shoulder and spun him about. The shag-bearded face of Big Bill Betterige was before him.

"Whichaway you headin', son? They's fun ahead. Squat down and give a look-see. Nothin' outside's as good as this to settle a man's stommick!"

The Kid tried to meet the deep blue of Big Bill's eyes, but under the straightforward impact of the trapper's gaze, his own eyes fell and he stood still, not even moving under the other's grip. Big Bill seemed engrossed in measuring him, eyeing every feature, hunting for something in his face which he alone might recognize. For moments he stood there, his hairy paw gripped tight in the slack of the Kid's jacket. Then the trapper's hand fell away.

The Kid raised his eyes again to the older man's, studying him in return. In that moment it seemed to the Kid that Big Bill had found what he sought. The gaunt face was less gaunt and the challenging light in the blue-glazed eyes was softer, more companionable. This change puzzled the Kid, but still it was uncomfortable to face this man.

Big Bill Betterige was a legend of the fur trails. Even the Indians named him a spirit from the upper world, so great was his reputation for fearlessness on the trail and in combat, so terrifying the tales told of his prowess in battle. The Kid would have wriggled free of the trapper's gaze, but something in the man's eyes held him, some strange attraction he could not name overrode the chill that laced his spine when he faced such a man as this. Then he moved to sit at a bench before

the great table in obedience to Betterige's direction.

Big Bill turned to the company and the high spirits boiling within him rolled his voice against the sod and 'dobe walls with an impact that shook their foundations.

"Sein' as it was me that proposed playin' skinner, I reckon I got to hold the knife. Who'll put their hand on thuh table afore me?" he challenged.

The Panther Kid felt the hot gaze of the trapper play over him as he spoke, and though he knew that through some strange chance Big Bill had chosen him to play, he kept his head down and said nothing. The rest of the room rose in a clamor. Jim Beckwourth and Jim Bridger argued loudly as to who was to have the honor.

The Kid had heard of this game, recognized it as high play in the code of the buckskin legion, and he held his breath, hoping that Big Bill would choose another. Then, the trapper's eyes swung back to the yellow-headed youngster before him. . . .

"Yaller-head, what do they call ye?" he bellowed.

Someone else in the room volunteered the information. "That's the Panther Kid. He might be bad medicine, seein' as how he run with a mess of renegade Apaches for eight years—but he ain't!"

The indictment carried in the tone of that last phrase made the Kid cringe. A hot wave flooded into the roots of his shoulder-long hair, but he sat without sound or movement. Before this, some hard-bitten mountain man of short patience had spoken even plainer of the yellow that ate the heart out of the Kid. Big Bill, however, had apparently missed the meaning in the man's words, for he spoke again to the slumped figure before him.

"Yo're a younker, Panther Kid," he said, "so I reckon you don't savvy this skinner game. Like this, it is. Put yore hand on the table, fingers spread. Now, I takes this knife and tries to stick it in one of yore fingers. Yore aim is tuh move 'em so I miss. Ever' miss I make costs me a drink for the house, and if'n yuh don't move fast enough oncet, then we all buys you a drink. Split fingers is somewhat sore for a spell, Kid, but take my word, I counts sixteen in this here room, and I reckon ever' one of 'em would trade a split finger for sixteen shots of free whiskey any day, eh?"

A HOWL of agreement went up from the trappers as they crowded around the table. The Kid stared at his long-fingered, steel-corded hand, spread out on the table as Big Bill had placed it. His glance strayed to the eighteen-inch knife swinging in its sheath at the trapper's side.

The hair of his nape crawled. He could see a finger divided into two bloody ribbons by a lightning dip of that razor-edged blade. He fought the grip of fear that clamped down on him, thought of the joy of playing such a game with such a man as Betterige, and of the chance it gave him to redeem himself with the buckskin brotherhood. But as Big Bill's knife cleared its sheath, his hand leaped from the table and he surged to his feet. Hands shoved him down again. Merciless eyes, hard with contempt, watched the color recede from his temples. Only Big Bill was friendly. He chuckled tolerantly.

"Take it easy, son," he cautioned. "I 'most always miss the first four or five tries."

The Kid's eyes laced through the crowd about him, desperation clouding his vision, but nowhere could he find a distraction that might break the tension of the moment. Suddenly, with a wave of resentment that shamed him, he jerked to his feet again. Hot fury twisted him. These men knew that the fear which drove him away from the table was none of his doing, yet they all held him responsible.

With matchless speed and the precision of long practice, his hand went low, yanked once, and came up with a long-barreled cap-and-ball. The implacable threat of its sixty-bore muzzle swept the whole room.

He directed his words at Big Bill Betterige, yet it was not to the trapper, but to these other buckskin men who knew his story that he spoke. "Leave me be! I ask no truck of you, and I'll take none. I'll pay my way in gold to the party that'll get me to the River first, but you'll have none of me and I'll have none of you till then!"

His voice quavered crazily, changed pitch, and broke under the strain of the resentment filling him. He spun on his heel and shouldered through the door. Behind him he heard the "Wah!" of disgust with which the men within dismissed him.

Outside, under the silence of the mountains, he felt sick and climbed to the top rail of the corral. He thought bitterly of the carousing gaiety within the great hall. Those were men of iron, every corner of their huge carcasses and their stone-willed spirits shod in spring steel by years on the out-trails of the fur empire. They had drifted into the mountain country in the same thin wave as his father had.

Yet, because they had counted coup and learned the savvy of the trails among their own company, because they had killed, because they had fought only to save their own lives, they had no sympathy for such a fear as his. They cared nothing that he had been stolen from his father, unknown and forgotten, and had travelled in the company of his captors for the last eight years of his boyhood. It made no difference to these men of the buckskin legion that the renegade Apaches who had raised him had taught him with stiff medicine, or that as Harona, the Panther, he had been forced to kill men of his own race, to scalp the coup of others, to stand up to beatings that had crushed his spirit. These trappers cared nothing of the horror he had been subjected to, the stark terror of a fifteen year old waif of the short-grass being forced to scalp and plait the long golden hair of a woman from a sacked wagon-train.

These mountain men expected him to rise above all this, to stalk among them with no memories, to joke with the death he had seen so often and so terribly. That he was yellow was their appraisal of him, and miserably the Panther Kid clenched his hands tight. With those memories clinging to him, crowding his nights with restlessness and his days with aversion to violence, he knew he was no better a man than the fur-trail brotherhood named him.

Climbing wearily down from the fence, he found bivouac in a pile of hay under the gate of Fort St. Vrain.

CHAPTER TWO

Satan Rides the Buckskin Trails

THE Panther Kid kept in the background, mingling with the Arapahoes who traded with the fort, as one after another of the carousers of the night before made their appearance and headed for the water-trough in the center of the compound. Joviality still was in the air, for not even bitterroot whiskey could dampen the spirits of men in for rendezvous.

Trading progressed rapidly, and by noon the Taos party, headed by Big Bill Betterige signified that they were finished and would leave on the out-trail within the hour. Big Bill was popular, for his reputation cast nearly as large a shadow across the beaver trails as that of dapper Kit Carson to the south. The whole company at the fort threw themselves into the task of getting Betterige's animals packed and their owner full of bitter-root.

The Kid watched these preparations with practised eye, measuring the skill of each man by the job he made on the packs. Many an animal would have been better trapped if the deft hands of the Panther had had a part in the fashioning of the pack-rope knots, but he could not find it in his heart to criticize, even to himself, the work of men who faced the world with no blemish in their courage. Engrossed in watching from a shady corner, the Kid was startled to feel a huge hand settle on his shoulder.

"I hear yo're headin' east, younker," Big Bill Betterige grinned down at him. "Throw in with us, kid. We're bound south to Taos and Sante Fe, and from thuh last-named there's plenty of trains eastbound to the river. Won't be a party leavin' here for six weeks. You'll beat 'em sure travelin' our way."

The Kid shifted uneasily. He felt the same attraction to Big Bill he had felt when he had first seen the trapper, but now it was marred with that scar that had come from within himself. Betterige was the finest example he had ever seen of the man he knew he could be himself—if he could but forget those childhood memories. He looked again at Big Bill and shook his head.

There was an instant change in the big trapper. The bland light warming the deep eyes glinted. The bear-trap mouth clamped grimly shut, and the huge figure tightened into a rigidity.

"You're refusin'?" he grunted.

The Kid nodded. A chill like that after fever gripped him as he read anger in Betterige's face. He had seen that expression too often on the painted and twisting features of Apache warriors not to know what would follow.

"No man refuses Bill Betterige. Stand up and explain yoreself or take your lickin' lyin' down!"

The Kid didn't move. A fury as plain as Big Bill's own burned within him, but he was helpless to answer its call. He hated this man who would force him, a free agent, to take a beating on so small excuse. That handicapped spirit of self-reliance which he so carefully tried to fan into a consuming flame, flickered for a moment in resentment then he was passive.

Big Bill stooped, lifted him by his collar to his feet, and slammed him across the mouth with the back of a hairy hand. The Kid spit salt blood and staggered to his feet. Every muscle quivered, screamed for revenge of that blow, but memories of other blows more savage held him powerless.

Betterige spat a contemptuous Mexican phrase and closed in on him. For ten minutes the dust flew about the pair. Big Bill hammered and mauled, wrestled and kicked but his opponent did little more than to protect himself from the other's savagery.

It came to end, but not before a crowd had gathered. And when Big Bill walked away it was with an unhappy look on his face, as though something he had counted on had not occurred. The Kid was a battered pulp, thoroughly beaten, but he still stood steadily on his feet, a peculiar light burning in his eyes, half shadow and half red fire. Big Bill had walked away with the Kid's promise to travel with the Taos party.

The Kid could discover no reason for the big trapper's insistence that he travel in the party, but marked it down as the instinct of a man used to command. A lesser one must obey or suffer. This had been the code of the Apaches with whom he had traveled and the Panther Kid knew it well. He had suffered at Big Bill's hands just as he had with the redskin renegades. Now he would obey.

But in the end, on some day when the gods were good and he could forget those years among the Apaches, his manhood would come back to him in one destructive

rush. Then Big Bill would be paid back in full for this beating before the brotherhood at the buckskin rendezvous.

With this solemn and passionate resolve, the Panther Kid moved in easy grace across the compound and threw his own rig into trail-shape. In a half-hour the Taos party was bound up the course of the Platte, to its end against the thin blue of the mountains.

AS THE party moved to the headwaters of the Platte, crossed a brace of ridges, and started down the upper reaches of the Arkansas, the Kid found he had fallen back to the days of his captivity among the Apaches, for the whole company soon fell in with Big Bill's manner of treating him and he became the slave of them all.

All save the leader, however, remembered that he was a white man, a youngster, and their demands were light and their jibes tinged only with fun. Betterige, on the other hand seemed to have acquired a strong dislike of the younger man. He was brutal in his treatment and ruthless in his scorn. The force of every blow, the savagery of every jibe seemed to store itself within the Kid, to become a part of the growing tension of pent-up hatred which he felt, in turn, for the leader of the party.

Offense piled upon offense until the shame of his existence in the camp keyed the Kid to drum-like tenseness. Yet he could not break free of the iron bond of fear which held him, could not shake loose the thought of the horror of blood and mangled flesh that might result should he strike out at the bearded giant who hazed him night and day.

Finally, while they were encamped yet a half a day above the Bent brothers' post on the Arkansas, his hatred and fear of Big Bill crowded down the more elemental fear that had held him rooted at St. Vrain's, and he slipped quietly into the night to face the possible threat of Little Horse and the renegade Apaches roaming the Arkansas valley.

While the others were gathered about the fire, and they imagined him to be down at the river with the water-bucket, he pulled the stake on his pony's trail-rope and rode into the night. Indian sign had been plentiful on the ridges between the Platte and the Arkansas valleys and the trail to the east was, as Big Bill had said, quickest by way of Santa Fe. Taking scant pleasure in the fact that the rest of the party faced the journey to the south with little fear of Indian or danger, he cut through the hills to the south, carefully avoiding the trail down which the others would go to Bent's Fort.

The night passed swiftly. At daybreak he emerged from the up-turned slabs of the hills onto the flat roll of a vast plain. He ate breakfast in the saddle and an hour later he stopped at a little creek to let his pony blow.

Hunkered down in the shade of a piñon, he saw something that might have frightened a less seasoned plainsman. On a ridge, less than a mile away, two horsemen crested and paused to survey the country. Even at that distance his prairie-trained eyes recognized the riders as Indians and named their tribe. Feathered pennants flew from their lances and he knew that these were scouts of Little Horse's Apache band.

Danger at a distance was no threat to the Panther Kid. It was only when it was close upon him, when there was no way to avoid the death-dealing action that might result, that he was robbed of the courage and the cord-muscled speed of his slab-shouldered body.

He and his mount were cached in a little swale and he knew that there was little chance of being sighted by the Indians. His guess soon proved correct, for in a few moments the horsemen put their mounts in motion, rode a short dis-

tance up the ridge, and disappeared on the far side.

He waited for an hour and then rode carefully down the creek bottom for several miles before climbing the side of the ridge. He halted again at noon to chew a string of jerky while his horse ate. Almost ready to remount, he glanced back over the trail he had followed.

A half-dozen miles back a low mesa jutted up from the rolling scarps of the first hills, and from its top a plume of smoke was tracing upward in an interrupted column of rolling puffs. Signal-talk! The Panther Kid had seen it made many times in the past, and he read its message. His head pivoted, and on a promontory of the hills which blocked his trail ahead, another gray column gave answer. "Prey in the valley!" said one smoke to another, and the answer came back from ahead, "We see!"

With swift precision the Kid saddled his animal and swung out of the valley. Crowding every ounce of speed of which his stocky mount was capable, he rode in a gradually bending arc away from the hills in the desperate hope that he might outride the advance scouts lurking ahead.

A half hour proved the move to be futile. Close to a dozen low-riding Indians broke from the promontory and cut off at an angle he could not evade. The pony beneath the Kid seemed to realize what its rider was asking and ran belly low to the ground, working farther and farther away from these hills. But the Apaches continually gained.

A half hour of desperate pounding brought the Kid well away from the hills, and though the Indians were close, he judged their own mounts were jaded. His pony was drawing a little away and he sensed he might escape. Then, without warning, the winded horse stumbled, caught its stride for a moment, then went down heavily, crashing against a boulder.

STAGGERING agonizingly, bent double in striving for the wind driven out of him by the fall, the Kid made it to the horse. The animal was quivering in death, its neck bowed awkwardly where it had rolled against the boulder. With a stoicism learned under the heavy hand of these same Indians, the Kid settled his back against the dead animal and awaited the approach of Little Horse's men.

The thunder of their ponies' feet made a sullen sound in the air. Then he was startled to sense a sudden change in the beat. When he turned to look, astonished, he saw the renegades in full flight back over the rolling grasslands.

Instinctively his eyes sought the smoke pillar on the horizon of his back-trail that had first spoken to these scouts. The smoke was again speaking, telling of more white men near. The Kid leaped to his feet and faced the east. There, coming up out of a draw, was the thin string of Big Bill Betterige's party, riding hard in his direction, and among them he recognized a new member of the party.

Close scrutiny revealed the newcomer to be a woman, and she rode on Big Bill's right in the place of honor. The Kid wondered what manner of woman would travel the plains country with so ruthless a man as Big Bill, but he soon had chance to discover for himself. The party rode up at full gallop and swung down about him.

Big Bill strode forward with a quizzical, almost admiring light in his eyes. The Kid thought, in a flash of insight, that the trapper seemed actually pleased that he had drifted in the night.

"Rode a mite far for water, didn't you, Kid?" was his greeting.

The Kid didn't answer, for there was still within him the hatred of the huge, open-faced mountain-man who had driven him from the camp the night before. Big Bill seemed to sense this. He made no open note of the fact that he was met by silence.

"Mary!" he called back over his shoulder. "Come up here and see the rest of the party. The Kid got lost last night lookin' for water. Looks like thuh Injuns was givin' him somethin' to think about when we come up. Guess glasses do have their uses, but I'd never have believed it!"

The girl came striding up in answer to Big Bill's call. The Kid eyed her eagerly. Women of this sort were but a hazy memory to him, entangled with the father he could not remember and the mother he had never known.

She was small, looking even more diminutive in her well-cut buckskin leggings, skirt and jacket. A wealth of warm brown hair crept from under her low-crowned hat. The soft tan of the wind and rain of the short-grass country heightened the color in her cheeks, and level brown eyes left no doubt of the breed from which this girl had sprung.

She offered her hand to the Kid with a smile, and he read in her eyes that neither Big Bill nor any of the others had told her of him, of the thing he carried within him. He felt a momentary gratitude to these men of the legion which was his heritage yet from which he was barred by the yellow brand of a broken nerve.

Then the girl was speaking. She patted a leather case swung over her shoulders. "The Panther Kid!" she smiled. "And I thought the panther was a fierce-looking animal. I hope you didn't mind our driving your caller away. You see, I was looking through my glasses here, and saw you take that nasty spill with the Indians right on your trail. Big Bill thought I was kidding him."

The Kid found a pleasure he had never known in the sound of this girl's voice. He wanted to continue, but Big Bill broke in.

"Get one of the spare horses, Kid, and get your rig aboard. Mary's old man, Budlong Cassidy, is expectin' us to deliver her safe and sound at Santa Fe and I don't want to take any chances of them Indians sizing us up and jumping us!"

The girl turned toward Big Bill with a teasing grin. "Why Mister Betterige," she jibed, "my father claims to have tramped a few trails with you, and he says that you've a reputation among the redskins of being a god of some sort. You afraid of Indians?"

The Kid caught the banter in her tone, the instinctive scorn with which she uttered the word 'afraid,' and he knew what she would think of him, in spite of the friendliness in her eyes now, when she should recognize the shame within him.

He turned his back and went silently to saddle a new pony, adding to the faint hope he always held that he might one day throw off the yoke of his fears, another fainter hope—that Mary Cassidy would never discover the brand of man he was.

CHAPTER THREE

A Thunderhead Brings News

THE party made good time. Two nights after leaving the Kid's dead horse on the Arkansas flats, they encamped halfway up the slopes of the pass into the Cimarrons. Here they found a note nailed to the hole of a huge pine at the ford of Deep Creek. The note was addressed to Big Bill and was terse.

> Bill:
>
> Wait for me here. Am up Deep Creek after meat. Back two-three days. Got news for you.
>
> K. C.

The Kid thought this might be a trick to delay Big Bill in reaching Santa Fe, but the big leader pointed to a roughly-sketched mountain peak on the paper, that thrust its head through heavy clouds.

"I've trapped many a trail with this fellow, Kid," Big Bill explained. "When

ever you see that sign, you can count it was Kit Carson wrote it!"

The party made camp at the ford and settled down to wait for the return of Kit Carson and his news. A day passed uneventfully, but that night the Kid saw that Mary Cassidy was not happy. A man of her own race, Big Bill's meat-killer, Brant Dunnevan, had for years been king-pin in the Indian camps about the trading posts. There was a dashing air about Dunnevan that he paraded before every squaw he met, and in the idleness of the waiting camp, he had not been able to resist trying his powers on Mary.

The Kid saw the by-play, watched it grow from something amusing to more than annoying for the girl, and his eyes shifted to Big Bill. The shag-bearded leader was also watching, but when the Kid turned to him, Betterige shrugged his shoulders as though passing the buck. The Kid colored. The gesture had been unmistakable. Big Bill was putting him through the acid test again for the first time since he had left the party in the Arkansas valley.

For an hour the Kid sat and squirmed under the attentions Dunnevan had been forcing on Mary. Finally the lady-killer got Mary to her feet and tried to urge her to take a walk down the stream. The girl hung back, jerked free of his grip, and her eyes sought help. The first man she saw was the Panther Kid, hunkered low on a log with blazing eyes fastened on the man and the girl.

The Kid read the distress in Mary's eyes, and before he had time to think, he moved swiftly across the clearing on silent feet, in that cat-like stride of his. With a rough hand he spun Dunnevan about.

The Irishman's face paled until he saw who had taken hold of him, then confidence flamed high in his eyes. "The Panther Kid, eh?" he snarled. "The Yellow Kid, more likely! Aimin' to start something, Mister?"

The Kid ignored the scorn in the man's voice. His own tones were clipped flat and short. "Miss Cassidy wants to be alone, Dunnevan!"

The other's mouth sagged in surprise, but he grinned evilly. "So do I—with her! Now get!"

With these words he chopped his hand upward in a hard uppercut. The Kid, however, suddenly gone berserk, stepped back, let the blow sail high into the air. In return he drove a shoulder-rigid, lighting-fast clip into Dunnevan's face. The timing was perfect and all the smashing drive of his muscle-hard body was in the blow. Brant Dunnevan's head snapped back, his knees buckled, and the man slid to the ground.

Mary Cassidy turned toward the Kid with gratitude and admiration in her eyes, but before she could speak Big Bill Betterige shouldered his way between them.

"When there's fighting in my camp, Kid," he rumbled, "I do it. Any man that hits one of the boys has got to lay me out, too! Hop to it."

The Kid looked up blankly. Was this another of Big Bill's tests? He could read no honest antagonism in the trapper's face, only an unknown something which lurked deep in Big Bill's mind, something unfathomable, but somehow linked with himself.

"I've no quarrel with you, Betterige," the Kid answered levelly. "I've no quarrel, and I'll not fight!"

An exasperated snarl rose in Betterige's throat. He smashed his maul-like fist into the Kid's jaw.

"Yellow, eh?" grunted the trapper. "I won't have a yellow man. Fight, or get whipped right in front of the lady!"

Mary seized Big Bill's arm and tugged at it while the Kid shook his head under the impact of the blow.

"Bill!" she protested, "the Kid is right. There's no quarrel between you!"

Big Bill stopped and looked at the girl

for a moment. He apparently saw something in her eyes that made him turn away from the Kid. Mary went with him, and as they walked away the Kid heard Bill talking low to the girl.

"It's a long story, Mary, about me and the Kid. It's a blood-quarrel between us, and I aim to see it settled. Come along and I'll tell you about it."

A blood-quarrel! The Kid stood dumbfounded at Big Bill's words. The old trapper must have confused him with someone else, for since he could remember, the Kid had never been in Big Bill's territory south of the Arkansas. However, mention of a blood-feud between them explained much of Betterige's attitude toward him on the trek south.

Whatever wrong Bill Betterige expected satisfaction for, must loom large in the trapper's mind or he would not demand such merciless reprisal. Now, the Kid knew Big Bill would tell Mary Cassidy the story of the trip south, the story of his refusal to play skinner at St. Vrain, the whole sordid story of the weakness that hounded him. It was the weakness which had made him refuse Big Bill a fight but moments before when every muscle of the Kid's body had been straining to smash steel-knuckled fists into the shaggy beard of the man who continually had kept him in a hell of shame.

The Kid drifted back to the fire after a little, but he was acutely conscious of the steady gaze of Mary Cassidy. Over and over in his mind he turned the thought he imagined he read in that intent stare. Certainty gripped the Kid that now the girl named him as did the others. . . . Yellow!

He stared moodily into the embers of the fire long after the rest had rolled into their blankets, and the thought recurred again. If he could only find himself in action with something at stake beside his own safety! He had been beaten and mauled through life until acquiescence was the easier course, until it had become a habit. Fear for his own person could not overcome that greater fear of blood and overcome that greater agony in others, it could not down the wave of nausea that shook him at the thought of swinging a tomahawk or a long knife or triggering a gun at another man.

Yet he remembered with savage pride that Mary Cassidy had looked to him for help, and without nausea, without fear, without a thought he had answered her call and smashed Brant Dunnevan's face into a pulp. He gloried in the look of grudging respect Dunnevan had shot at him as he climbed to his feet after the blow.

If Mary Cassidy were again in danger, if the whole company was threatened, perhaps in the madness of a moment he might break the forged chain of events and memories that robbed him of the courage which a man must have. He rolled into the blanket after an hour without knowing that even now, riding down Deep Creek with the news Kit Carson carried, was danger to the girl, a threat to the whole company, ruin for Big Bill Betterige and a long trapping knife driven by a steel hand toward his own chest.

CARSON'S hunting-party arrived soon after sunup. Man for man they might have been blood brothers of the south-bound party. Distinction lay in the two leaders. Where Betterige was huge, bulky, powerful, lithe grace marked Kit Carson. There was a neatness about the man, a trim to the cut of his fringed garb which might have marked a lawyer along the River towns, but which looked strange on the slopes of the Cimarrons. With his jet black hair, his acquiline nose, his steady blue eyes, and the smooth flow of balanced muscles beneath his jacket, Carson was a handsome man.

The Kid eyed him eagerly and watched

Mary Cassidy covertly, but she was apparently an old friend of the scout. Big Bill hoorawed Carson for a little time, then called the Kid to him.

"I want you should meet the mountain'est man of us all," he chuckled, introducin' the Taos Thunderhead — Kit Carson! Kit, this is the Panther Kid."

Carson's eyes brightened as he took in the tall, slab-muscled frame of the Kid. The name seemed familiar to him. "The same called Har-ona?"he asked. "I had a run-in with Little Horse three weeks ago. He told me about you, said you'd made away from him after eight or ten years. Stop in at my wickiup if yo're ever down on the Red River Fork, Kid."

Hooraw continued for a few minutes, then Carson got down to the news he carried. "Bill, remember Wily Coggs?" he asked.

"Remember that double-edged skunk!" he roared. "Hell yes! He's thuh lowest-down fur pirate in the mountains. Did somebody give him his needings?"

"I wish!" said Carson. "No, Bill. A Navajo grubbin' up at my camp above Eagle's Nest says that he saw Coggs and a crew of cutthroats over on War Creek. That's yore cache-grounds, ain't it?"

Big Bill Betterige jumped to his feet and grabbed a pack up from the ground. As he headed toward the tethered animals, he shouted back over his shoulder.

"Thanks for the news, Kit! Somewhat like p'izen, it was, but thanks, old-timer. The rest of yuh get a move on. We got travelin' to do. There's three thousand in furs in them caches of mine and six thousand silver dollars Mex!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Fur Raids on War Creek

LIKE a mountain lake whose placid surface stirs at the first drift of storm-clouds over the horizon, Big Bill's party changed its face. The easy high spirits of the long trek south were erased in a moment. Grimness settled over them all and they turned automatically to the swift task of camp-breaking.

Among them, the Panther Kid was the swiftest. Fired by the struggle raging within him, chance for action was welcome relief from tension. Packs seemed to fall into compact shape under his powerful and expert hands, and protesting pack-animals became suddenly docile as he approached.

Once he caught Big Bill looking quizzically at him, but puzzled fury burned in his heart when he thought of Big Bill, for the leader had admitted a blood-feud against him. Now the Kid's stifled courage was answering, even though he could not guess what Big Bill's quarrel with him might be.

It was the level, searching gaze of Mary Cassidy, however, which he felt most. As he moved through the camp he could feel the intent play of her eyes over all he did. The honest appraisal in those brown eyes made him uneasy, as though Mary were measuring him, sizing up his steel, and he knew with a feeling of desperation that he must fall short.

He was grateful when Big Bill, at the head of the string of horsemen, swept his hand downward in the forward signal and the little cavalcade moved briskly out of the swale at the ford and headed toward the towering scarps of the Cimarrons and the winding chasm of War Creek deep within them.

A short hour out on the trail, Brant Dunnevan rode up beside the Kid. He held abreast of him a while, his small blue eyes searching the Kid's face for something he could not find. Finally he spoke.

"Reckon I been making a mistake about you, Kid," he said. "They's a sight for a man to learn on the trail. Calculate I ought to know by now a young bull's bad medicine to cross and apt to make a fuss

if things don't go his way. Same with you. Probably you got your reason for actin' gun-shy, so to speak, but me—well, I got a regard for them fists of yourn now!"

The Kid nodded dully. Dunnevan, for all his shine with women and his smooth talk, was of the spring-steel breed of the mountain men. Where there was gallantry in their dealings with the few women they encountered among most of the buckskin legion, Dunnevan was coarser, a poorer quality of man than his comrades. Yet he was possessed of the one thing the Kid lacked.

With another man, the Irishman's words would have squared the account, but with the Kid, they meant nothing. It was not in him to condemn the dapper fur man for his actions, since he had carried them off with boldness, but he could not forget the vain light in the trapper's eyes as he stood talking with Mary Cassidy. Dunnevan was weak, undependable, yet the Kid chuckled mirthlessly at the thought. Who was he to call any man weak? He clung grimly to the one bright spot of the incident—he had struck a blow!

Gathering what pleasure he might from this one vindication of himself as a man in the beaver brigade, he spurred his mount and rode forward, leaving Dunnevan more perplexed than ever, with his eyes narrowed in unfeigned hatred.

Big Bill Betterige's eyes were hard with determination, his body tense with expectation of a battle at the caches on War Creek, but to pass the time it took to cross the hills, he was talkative. The Kid realized this and was grateful. Thought was hammering in his head, the eternal self-accusation of cowardice, and talk crowded thought. He grinned faintly at Big Bill.

"Well, younker," boomed the old trapper, "figger to ride scout with me, eh? *Bueno!* The shinnery's a mite purty hereabouts and I reckon yo're right. Get up front and you can take it in best. But they's more to ridin' scout than gazin' at the trees and the rocks. Take like now—supposin' of a sudden they's a screech on the air and fifty-sixty 'Paches come loopin' fer hair, come down as fast at us as that blue-grouse makin' in over the trees. They needs medicine, and scout-riders has got to have it in their kits—like this!"

Big Bill pointed to a big blue grouse skidding in fast over the trees. His hand dropped awkwardly, but with amazing speed the huge double-barreled ball gun thrust in his sash jerked out, tipped, and crashed heavily twice.

The grouse slammed into the first ball, turned over twice, took the second in the midst of scattering feathers, and sailed soddenly to the ground. Big Bill grinned with pleasure and shoved the gun back into his sash. His eyes were solemn, lending serious honesty to his words as he looked again at the Kid.

"What's back of a man's glimmers is his own troubles, I figgers, but what his trail-pards can see of him is theirs. That's why I'm tellin' you this. I'm layin' off riding you, Kid. Miss Mary's dead set against it, and I think she's right. But iffen yo're going to get yore teeth into this country, yuh got to clam down on a good bite. Fust off, learn to sling a fire-stick like that, make yore ball go where yuh look, and fast. That's the best life-saver yuh can have south of the Arkansas. I'll take care of 'Paches and bearded snakes equally good!"

THE noise of gun-thunder had flushed a covey of grouse and they came drumming down the wind. The Kid sat rigidly in his saddle, Big Bill's words droning meaninglessly in his ear. Suddenly he was alive with action. The cap-and-ball six-gun hung beside his tobacco-pouch slapped into his hand and yammered into the air.

When the pall of the black powder had drifted away from the two at the head of

the caravan, six of the fast-flying birds were down and the Kid's weapon was back in his belt. There was no pleasure for him in the beat of the gun-butt against the heel of his hand, for he still could see the horror of a night among the warriors of Little Horse's command. On that night the same gun had thudded against his palm, and in the firelit circle of their own camp three shag-bearded whites had died with a look of bitter astonishment on their faces.

Before they died those men had marked the pallid face of the Kid among the warriors and knew him to be of the same race as themselves, even as he shot them down. Those three had not known that in the shadows lurked a dozen of the Kid's most persistent tormentors in the Indian camp, nor did they know that a dozen muzzle-loaders were trained at the fair-skinned redman's back. The Kid was young then, and the will to live had been strong.

The hearty, booming voice of Big Bill, now tinged with something more than admiration, shook the torment of that old red-hazed picture from the Kid's mind.

"I'd admire learnin' how you done that, Kid. It's gettin' in this country so's a man's got tuh be faster'n a wall-eyed whang-doodle to save his skin from bush-whackin'. It's bound tuh get wuss, too, the more touchy-tempered fortune-hunters that come west. Mark me, Kid, there'll be a day afore you and me are dead when the big chiefs among the whites in this empty country will be them that can crack caps fastest and oftenest."

"Yeah," answered the Kid dully. "Reckon you're right, Bill. I used to hunker out away from the women when Little Horse and his men were out on the hunt, practicin' with this gun they gave me to kill white men with. I used to work for hours gettin' it free, used to dream of drawin' down on the whole caboodle in camp and gut-shooting the lot. But it was just thinking, that's all. You got to be more than fast, you got to have nerve and a steady hand when you're facing hot eyes that mean death to you if you miss. I'll never sling a gun right. I can't stand the eyes of them in front of me."

Big Bill looked sharply at the Kid. Mingled with the astonishment still marking his face was a curious slant to his brows, as though he wondered if the bonds of broken nerve which hampered the steel deep within the Kid would ever break, would ever free the wild spirit that leaped occasionally behind the dull, misery-deadened eyes of Har-ona. Big Bill's stare was long and hard. Suddenly his mouth softened in a grin of inspiration and he drew the long knife from his sash.

"This here is war medicine, too, Kid. Reckon you showed me up with the shootin'-iron, but I take all comers with a long-knife!" Bill measured distance with his eye. "Take that cedar at sixty feet. I'll pin down that chunk of moss facin' us."

Rhythmically the big trapper's arm swept up and forward. The steel left his hand in humming flight, spun a dozen times, and jerked to a quivering halt in the mark he had set. Big Bill leaned far forward in the saddle to follow the weapon's course, and directly on the tail of the "chunk" of the knife into live wood sounded his gusty "Wagh!" of pleasure. Expectantly he turned to the Kid.

The younger man's face was pale with struggle, but he rode steadily forward until he could lean from the saddle and wrench the steel free of the tree. With no perceptible time for sighting distance or weighing the balance of the blade, he sent it arcing forward in a flat-flying streak of shimmering light for twice the distance Bill's throw had carried. Both men gigged their mounts and rode toward the aspen marking the end of the course of the throw. Still vibrating madly, the hilt of the blade stood out squarely from an old blaze on the trail-side of the tree.

Big Bill emitted a low whistle of admiration and again to the Kid came that puzzled thought of the blood-feud between himself and Big Bill. The trapper had spoken of such a quarrel to Mary Cassidy, but never a word to him. Borne up on an unfamiliar wave of confidence toward Bettergie, the Kid raised his eyes level with Big Bill's and spoke softly.

"I heard you talking to Mary," he said earnestly. "Reckon mebbe you didn't want me to, but I overheard what you said. What have you got against me? I been backward, mebbe I laid down on some things you thought I should have stood up and fought on, but there's a reason for it all. You said you had a blood-quarrel with me, and yet I never saw you before we met at St. Vrains. D'you figger you knowed my folks before Little Horse got me, or do you figger I'm somebody you've run across before?"

For a long minute Big Bill didn't answer. The Kid's puzzlement deepened as he caught the shadow of an old sadness that passed over the face of Betterige.

"You heard right, Kid," he answered slowly. "There is a blood-quarrel 'twixt you and me. Mebbe I did know yore kin years ago—or think I did. But let it pass. What the quarrel is I'll tell you mebbe before we hit Sante Fe, mebbe never. Anyway, I won't be tellin' you until the difference 'twixt us is settled permanent. Jest to be sure, I make you to be twenty-two and picked up by Little Horse somewhere around the Alder Creek crossing of the Republican early in '19. That near right?"

GROPING in his mind, reaching back into half-remembered dates told him by his Indian captors, the Kid nodded in answer. Ghosts walked through his memory with Bill's words, ghosts and a great curiosity. Tall, wide-shouldered, and alive with the spring of youth—a man to all appearances, yet lacking a man's fighting heart—was he to learn that his heritage was sprung from a long-haired mountain man Big Bill Betterige might have known in younger days?

Big Bill had promised settlement of the feud between them before they reached Sante Fe. Was he to find trace of the family he had never known, and loose them along with his life in facing Big Bill over a quarrel he could not name?

The Kid dropped back from Bill's position at the head of the caravan, tortured by these new thoughts. He turned them over in his mind and the threat of the impending settlement with the old trapper crowded the older turmoil from him. He forgot the ever-fresh agony of his years in the blood-festooned camp of Little Horse and the renegade Apaches; he forgot men who had died at his hands under the ruthless commands of Little Horse; he forgot that even now he was riding with a caravan bent on dealing death to fur pirates.

Bill Betterige was the mightiest warrior of the fur frontier and he was the trapper's sworn enemy. That Bill spoke softly, had even been friendly in mentioning the quarrel did not lessen the threat, for the old mountain-man had minced no words and it was well known along the beaver trails that when Big Bill had a quarrel, he settled it!

Half an hour later, as the caravan entered the valley of War Creek, the Panther Kid was riding dazedly a dozen yards behind the leader, still fighting to untangle the maze of thoughts that hammered in his head. The sun had cut low over the western horizon and shadows lay long on the floor of the valley. The Betterige party was less than half across the little park flanking the stream when attack came.

Bellying across the valley in a crackling roar of sound, rifles spoke from the rock cliffs marking the southern wall. Lead howled through the air, screaming a death-

song accompaniment ot the crash of the guns.

With a savage curse at his own stupidity in riding into the face of ambush, Big Bill Betterige spun his horse about and rode the length of his cavalcade, shouting lurid orders.

"Hit to the tall timber!" he bellowed. "Unlimber and get the critters yore ridin' tied. Don't waste powder. They're holed up in thuh rocks at my number one cache! Get in the timber and we'll give them skunks a mite of a dressin' with lead-splints tuh take the pizen outen 'em! Scatter!"

Lead burned close, then bit into the tightly-bunched riders. The Panther Kid felt the swift wind of a spinning slug and instinctively dropped to the far side of his pony, leaving only a buckskin-clad knee and one white-knuckled fist exposed to view.

Another slug scored the air above his thigh as he dropped and he knew that the rifleman had drawn bead on his upright figure a second before that lightning twist to the safe side of his pony.

Curses and a howling yell of pain rose behind him. He swung his mount about and switched to the other side of the animal. Swiftly he rode back among his comrades. He caught a brief glimpse of Mary Cassidy's grim, firm-set face as she fought for control of a pony which was maddened by the pain of a long furrow scored across its rump. More lead beat down at them from the caves in the rock wall across the valley.

Mary's horse jumped convulsively, screamed, and fell suddenly in full run. Its rider was catapulted from the saddle, skidded through the grass headfirst, and lay still, a small huddled form. The rest of the party was well scattered, breaking for the timber as fast as their horses could make it.

The Kid looked for help, but the others were riding away, their backs turned, unaware of what had happened to the girl. The renegades at the cache had spotted her fallen body, but the Kid had no way of telling whether they counted her as a man or had recognized her slender form as that of a woman. They were firing at her where she lay.

A deadfall log scant inches from her head leaped under the impact of a close-laid shot. More slugs ripped spurts of dust from the unwilling ground. With the faster-than-thought action of reflex, the Kid bent low in his crouch along his pony's flank and hooked the unconscious form of the girl into the rigid crook of his free arm. The impact of the yank with which he lifted her free of the ground nearly tore loose his grip on the horn of his saddle.

The pony faltered in its stride at this sudden addition to the one-sided weight already straining the cinch, but the stout little animal caught its stride and labored on.

The Kid found his grip loosening and the saddle twisting under the strain upon it. He straightened in the saddle, and in so doing, called another fusillade of shots from the rocks.

Some of the renegades were taking after him, firing as they rode. Lead again hummed close, but he did not dare slip behind the shield of the pony's body for fear of dragging the inert form of the girl.

Almost to the fringe of the timber where by now the booming voice of Big Bill Betterige urged him on, the marksmen across the valley counted coup. The Kid felt only a sledge-like blow that bit deep into his back and drained his strength from him in one gush of pain. Then he tumbled from his saddle, twisting in his fall that the girl might not be pinned beneath him. Pain, shock, even the shame of a shattered fighting-nerve left him as blackness settled like a welcome blanket over his troubled spirit.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blood Feud Wipe-Out

THE Panther Kid fought up out of the black of unconsciousness to meet a black almost as deep, blotting the outlines of the timber over his head. An occasional star-flicker told him that hours had passed and that night had settled on the valley of War Creek.

He stirred groggily and a dull ache pounded up his back where a renegade slug had driven his powder-flask hard above his kidneys. Another stir in the darkness answered his movement and a hoarse whisper reached out at him.

"Come out of it, Kid?" Big Bill's words formed slowly, as with an effort.

"Seems as though—" he answered. "Where's Miss Mary and the rest?"

"Figgered Mary was hurt some bad and needed a doc. Kept me two men and sent the rest on with her. Lightnin' Tom Fudge's place is over the next range. Figgered they'd get help back by noon tomorrer and we could stand Wily Coggs and his five off till then."

"Good!" murmured the Kid. Then with a voice softer in spite of himself, "Are yuh hit, Bill?"

"Mixed with lead some," grunted the old trapper. "Ain't mortal, I reckon."

The Kid crawled to his hands and knees and crept to where he could make out the faint shadow of Big Bill lying on the ground. Behind the trapper was a huge boulder. Beyond, almost at the limit of the starlight was a sod hut, set in a small clearing. The Kid looked closely about and realized he had been moved from the place where he had fallen.

"Where's the two you kept with you?" he asked.

Big Bill chuckled. "You're one of 'em, son. The other was Dunnevan. Look behind yuh at the foot of the rock!"

The Kid crawled to the rock and, searching in the grass, came to a small pack chest, heavily studded with strapping. The lid lay tilted back and within the Kid could make out a heap of coins glowing dully silver and yellow in the faint light. White men's money was strange to him but he knew there was a fortune in the box. He turned swiftly back to Big Bill.

"Seen something, did yuh, Kid?" grinned the old trapper through white lips. "Dunnevan seen the same thing. Reckon that if he figgered he coulda kilt me and made off without Wily Coggs and his crew catchin' up with him, he would have. He done the next best thing, though. Went across the valley and made peace with Coggs. Figgered to take a split with Coggs ruther than risk losin' the whole thing. They took him into their camp safe, too. Heard him hollerin' at their sentry a half-hour ago."

"He knows I was plumb out and you drilled up bad?" The Kid jerked the question out.

"Yup!" nodded old Bill. "When he went coyotin' off across the valley you and me was lyin' side by side on the floor of my old dugout yonder, 'thout more'n a cottontail's life 'twixt the two of us."

The Kid's eyes widened. He understood the halting stammer of Big Bill's speech, the exhaustion weighing the older man down, now. With swift eyes he measured the distance to the sod shanty and a wave of admiration at the power in the old man's riddled body swept him.

"Yuh carted me clear out here, and you with that blood-spillin' window in yore middle? That the way you figger to settle a blood-quarrel, Betterige?"

Big Bill grunted dourly. "They won't neither of us be settlin' any quarrel," he pointed out. "Dunnevan and Coggs and their boys'll be doin' the job for us, less'n we lay campaign out quick. Come daylight they're goin' to charge that shanty and we got to whittle 'em down to our size while they're coming. Reckon we

better load up and get sot. 'Tain't more'n a hour to daybreak!"

Without further words the two set to work. Old charges were dumped free and crusted bores swabbed clean. In short minutes their weapons had been recharged and capped and they counted the death-sentences they held between them.

Old Bill's heavy double-bore could fire but twice and the six chambers of the Panther Kid's ball-gun raised the tally to but eight. Big Bill figured the force across the canyon at six, seven with Dunnevan. It was a bleak prospect, but the old trapper chuckled his unconcern.

"We got the odds, Kid," he said. "Eight tuh seven! Me, I've won a few pots in my time on lesser odds than that by a hundred-to-one, and I'm making straight talk, younker, when I says that by the 'Pache hell of the Arkansas, we'll cart eight top-ha'rs tuh Sante Fe!"

THE Kid recognized the unreal ring of the old trapper's optimism. Big Bill was lying, unable to move, almost too weak to raise a gun-arm, yet that rock-steady arm was all that could be counted on to hold off Dunnevan and Coggs.

Knowing this to be true, the Kid pressed his deadlier weapon into Bill's hands and took the two-charge gun. Already he could feel the twitch at his muscles that foretold the return of shaken nerves which made him helpless.

The old weakness was upon him, just as it had been each time a crisis which needed a man arose. Gratefully he remembered that Mary Cassidy was out of the valley and bound for safety. She would not be here to see the end of a man striped yellow to the heels. He knew the futility of his action, but he took Big Bill's double-bore, nevertheless, and moved off into the shadows to flank the helpless trapper.

Daylight surged quickly into the valley, a tidal-wave of light, and with it came the attack. Running silently and in single-file, the renegades rushed the dug-out where they imagined their victims to be.

The Kid raised his weapon and tried to line the sights, but a nausea swept him and he lowered the gun. The snarl of his own weapon in Big Bill's hand assailed his ears. Mechanically he counted the old trapper's score. Deliberately the shots came, evenly spaced. Three rang out like a cadence on a giant drum, and each beat took its toll from the running figures. Three of the low-bent, dark-skinned Border men fell without a sound. The others changed their course and came thundering toward the two at bay.

To the Kid they looked like a herd of buffalo which had come out of the night to grind the Apache camp to dust in years gone. Big Bill apparently sensed death was almost upon him with the shift of the runners' direction, for he thumbed three swift shots in a split-second of dragging time. One man among the renegades staggered, but caught his stride again and came on.

The Kid saw the first of them almost upon the helpless old man, and though his whole body screamed against it, the gun in his hand seemed to swing upward and hammer out death of its own accord. Sick, half-dizzy, but suddenly happier than he had been in his life, the Kid threw down the empty weapon.

The man near Bill had slammed to the ground with the first slug in his head. His fellow close on his heels had taken the second through his mid-section and lay retching in the grass. Only Coggs and Dunnevan were left, and now they came on slowly, seeming to realize by the silence that their prey were at last without teeth.

The Kid crouched low and with the hipless movement of a great cat, slipped through the shadows to stand with his back to a huge tree beside which Big Bill Betterige lay.

Coggs and Dunnevan approached carefully. The Kid had wondered why they

hadn't returned his fire and then he saw the reason. Not one of the fallen men or the two approaching wore guns. Each carried a sheathed knife at his belt, nothing more. The raid on the hut, then, was to have been an Indian raid, silent and at dawn. The guns had been left behind for fear one of the crew might become overanxious and shoot too quickly, thus giving their victims warning of the attack.

Cold sweat broke out on the Kid, chilled, his rigid and trembling muscles. His mouth was dry. The horror of blood and strife was on him, but in a small part of his mind was the strange and exhilarating thought that he was not afraid to die.

Suddenly the approaching renegades surged into a rush. Dunnevan's greedy little eyes were fastened on the treasure-box by the big rock, and he was in advance. He leaped toward the Kid with a long, wide-edged blade up-raised in his hand for a sweep downward into the throat, but the Kid dodged that first blow. He straightened and for an instant came face to face with the leering, contorted killer look of Dunnevan's.

Suddenly a great realization dawned on him. For years he had been branding himself a killer, a yellow coward who had killed men of his own race with whom he had no quarrel. It was this that had haunted him, had broken his spirit, had branded him yellow. There had been reason for the killing he had done as a helpless boy. That was over and done with. He now realized that he was of a different breed than the man before him. Dunnevan was the true killer. Dunnevan was the one who deserved to die.

With a whoop which might have come from the silent throat of Big Bill Betterige, the Kid threw his hard, whang-leather and steel body forward. An upward-sweeping shoulder bit deep into Dunnevan's ribs, straightened the fur-trail traitor. As the turn-coat trapper stood poised for that instant on his toes, the Panther Kid lanced a screaming fist flush to the point of the dapper Irishman's chin.

Dunnevan's head snapped backward, a faint, mushy crack of snapping bone sounded, and he tottered, took a lifeless step backward and crashed to the ground.

WILY COGGS was a different breed from Dunnevan. There was all the shaggy filth of the head bull of a great buffalo herd about the man, and much of the same brand of unreasoning strength. He came at the Kid with his own long knife held low in fighting-trim. There would be no dodging of the strokes of that blade, for there would be but one.

A livid, reasonless glow lighted the red-socketed eyes of the renegade, and the Kid knew that in this instant he had seen a more ruthless man than Little Horse of the Apaches. With the delicious pain of shredded knuckle-skin twitching across the back of his shock-numbed hand, the Kid regretted he wore no knife, regretted the years of tortured hell that had made him hate a steel blade.

With such a weapon now, he thought for an instant, he might even down Coggs and give life back to the old trapper on the ground and to himself. The thought passed swiftly, though it became almost a prayer, and in answer to it came the solid "chunk" of steel in live wood.

Big Bill Betterige was backing his blood-feud enemy to the limit. The effort of tossing that knife to the tree against which he stood had cost Big Bill plenty in torture to his wound, and the Kid seized the hilt with a new-fired fury.

Coggs closed quickly, but the Kid had a firm grip on Bill's knife and their free hands sought each other's weapon-hand and locked. Without movement, save the ripple of muscles, they stood for seconds in panting, dead-locked fury. Then Coggs feinted, drew the Kid off-guard, and drove his blade home.

The Kid saw the move begin, and too slow to step aside, he dropped toward the ground. The long steel bit deep, high in his shoulder. He felt the hot length of it part muscle fibre as it slid through him and jammed into the trunk of the tree at his back. His whole left side was paralyzed, but an old instinct urged him and his knife-hand moved upward and forward. The renegade was not prepared for the miss of his drive and he seemed waiting for the Kid's blade as it bit upward under his chin. With terrific force it drove through to stand out a span through the crown of Coggs head.

Ragged pain was tearing at him from the shoulder that was pinned tight against the bole of the tree, but the Kid's eyes were wide with pleasure, wide and bold. Once those eyes drifted from the fallen enemies fouling the clearing to the unconscious form of Big Bill Betterige. With a savagery that had something of comradeliness in it and a touch of warm regard, he wished that Big Bill was not wounded, but only sleeping, and that he would suddenly awaken and leap to his feet to settle the blood-quarrel which he had laid at the Kid's door.

His fever mounted and other strange thoughts came to him, but it fell away soon after the relief party from Tom Fudge's post reached the clearing that afternoon. He was weak and trembling from the effort of standing against the tree where the knife had pinned him, but his mind was clear.

He heard Big Bill's voice come to life, and he saw the light in Mary Cassidy's eyes as she bent over his own wound. A little later he was laid alongside Big Bill under a neat white tent.

He turned to the old trapper with the question that had burned in his mind through the long and agonizing morning. "When do we settle our quarrel, Bill?"

Big Bill grinned t a n t a l i z i n g l y. "It's done been settled, son," he answered.

"Not if the Panther Kid has anything to say, it hasn't," growled the Kid. "I'm takin' your challenge!"

"The Panther Kid hasn't anything to say about it any more, younker," returned Big Bill. "Iffen you was to talk as young Cole Betterige, lately escaped from Little Horse's Apache band, I might listen. Matter-of-fact, they's a box with six thousand dollars in it waitin' to be spree'd-out—foofaraw, fluff and, well, mebbe a weddin' at Sante Fe iffen you'll talk as my son. They ain't no mistake, Cole. I been huntin' yuh ever since the 'Paches kilt yore maw, put six arrers in me, and carried yuh off. That's whar the blood-feud come in, son. I seen right away when I meets yuh at St. Vrains that you was my boy, but I also seen yuh had a scrap ahead tuh git out from under the hell that was chawin' yore insides. You wasn't doin' justice to bein' the boy yuh ought tuh be, and till yuh was, I was yore enemy, so to speak. Do you take up my notion of a spree at Sante Fe?"

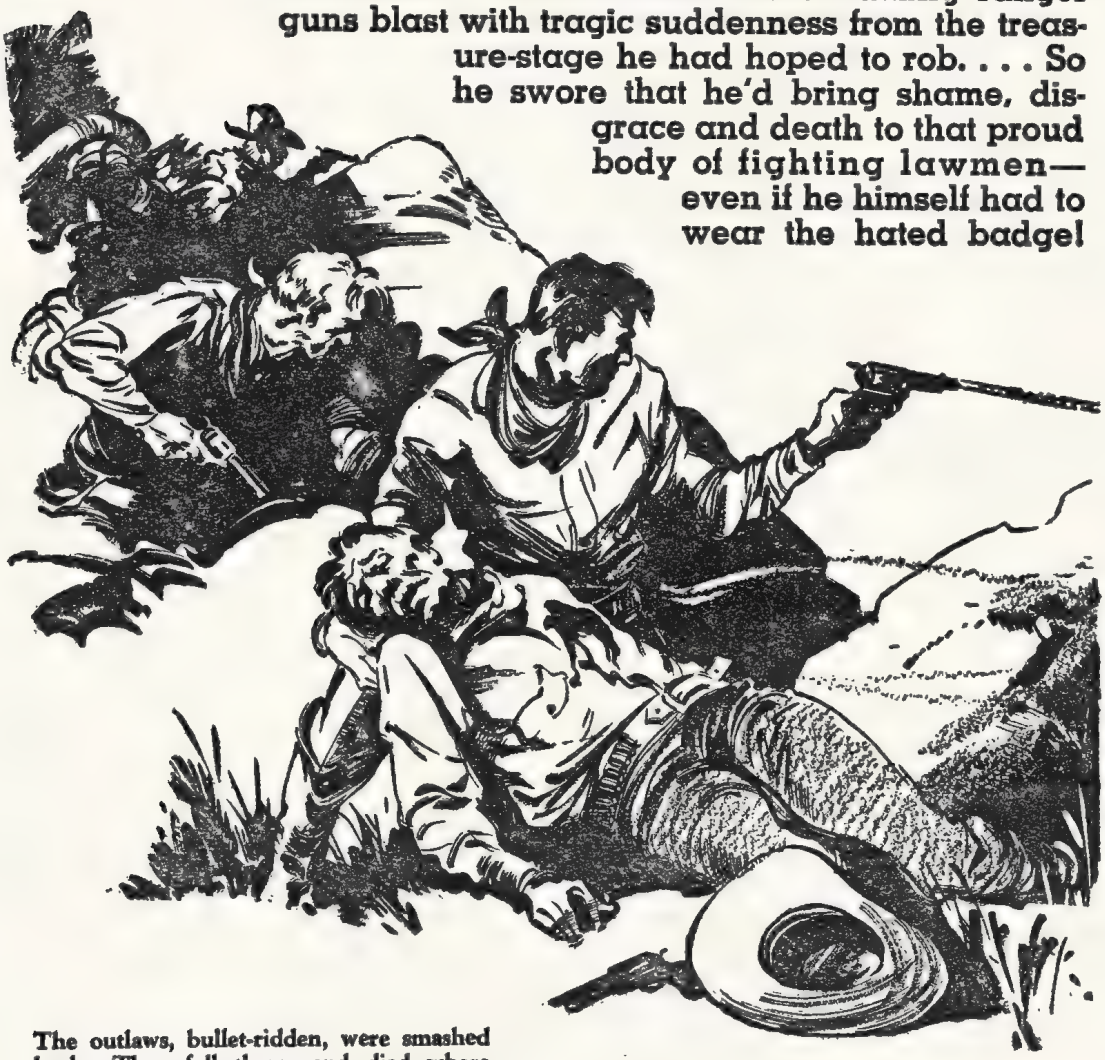
A great warmth surged through the Kid. At the end of a long and hell-blasted trail along which he had thought himself a weak excuse for the powerful man he looked, unworthy of anything life might offer, he had found everything it could possibly hold for him. His father was the recognized king of the beaver-trails, a wise and respected man. His own spirit had broken free of the web of horror that had held it—and there were other things.

He looked at Mary Cassidy, and when the girl smiled back in answer and came to his side, he reached up to take her hand. With a wide grin he turned to his father.

"Big Bill Betterige, your proposition sounds good," he said, looking toward the smiling girl. "Especially the part of that celebration at Sante Fe that ain't involved with foofaraw. I think Cole Betterige will be cuttin' lodge-poles come fall!"

THE END

Bill Girard, outlaw, heard those flaming ranger guns blast with tragic suddenness from the treasure-stage he had hoped to rob. . . . So he swore that he'd bring shame, disgrace and death to that proud body of fighting lawmen—even if he himself had to wear the hated badge!



The outlaws, bullet-ridden, were smashed back. They fell there, and died where they fell among the heat-seared rocks by the trailside. . . .

Who'll Die For Texas?

By John G. Pearsol

THE hills were barren and the high sun blazed hot on yellow rocks. A lizard crept lazily out into the sun on a rock behind which seven men were crouching, hidden beside the rock-lined, deep-rutted road. Their horses were back in the brush. From the trail, there was no sound, no sight of them.

Bill Girard crouched at the back of the rock where the lizard lay. He turned his head, wiped the sweat off his brow, and the lizard vanished. Bill Girard's brother, Tim, was beside him. Five more outlaws were behind them, waiting for the stagecoach that would soon come along the trail.

Bill Girard knew that the stage would be loaded with gold, because he had gotten the information from a friend, Pete Yeager, who thought Bill Girard was

Actionful novelette of a renegade Ranger

honest. The letter was in the pocket of Bill Girard's shirt now. It read:

Dear Bill:

I know you'll be glad to know that I was accepted in the Rangers. It's a great outfit, and I wish you would come and make a try at getting in too. It beats anything I ever did, and I'm sure you'd like it a lot better than traipsing all over hell, catching your wild horses, and getting cheated when you sell them to the cavalry.

They pay forty a month here, and you get plenty of action fighting the damned Indians in the western part of the state. We're cleaning up the outlaw gangs too, that have raised so much hell all over the country. You'd like it if you'd try it. I might be up your way some of these days, for if the raids on gold shipments out of the Oro Mountain country don't stop, we'll put Texas Ranger guards on the stages that carry them. If that happens I'll ask to be put there and maybe I'll see you. They leave the Oro Mines the last of each month. Watch for me.

Pete.

Bill Girard had grinned when he'd read Pete's letter; he'd laughed aloud at Pete's mention of catching wild horses. . . . Those were stolen horses instead of wild ones. They were stolen from the wagon trains that straggled through the Indian country in the western part of the state, but no-

body except Bill and his men knew that. Bill Girard was supposed to have a horse camp up in the hills. Folks thought he and his brother were wild horse trappers.

But the thing that interested Bill in that letter was the mention of the gold shipments by stage from the Oro Mountain country. That had brought Bill Girard up with a jerk. He hadn't even known there was a stage coach running in this wild, remote part of the state. Too many Indians out this way, he'd thought. And yet here somebody had been robbing the stages all along! Pete Yaeger had said they came through, "the last of each month." This was the last of the month. . . .

Bill Girard turned his head and looked at Tim, his younger brother, beside him there at the trail edge. Then the first faint rattling of stage coach wheels drifted to their ears, and young Tim Girard's black eyes snapped and sparkled with excitement. He watched the trail intently, and the thought came to Bill Girard as he looked at Tim that there was an unexpected streak of cruelty in him. Perhaps, Bill thought, it hadn't been wise to let Tim in on this business, for Tim was the type who could go too far. But Bill had always been soft where Tim was concerned. What Tim wanted he could have. . . .

Then the stage popped suddenly into view and Bill Girard watched it, with its high wheels, its new coat of paint glittering in the sun's reflection, the six horses that strained against their harnesses, and the driver in buckskin up on the seat.

The rattle of wheels came closer. Bill Girard could see the driver clearly now, and also the man beside him on the seat. They both looked damnably competent. This was a lot different than raiding unguarded wagon trains. . . .

The stage rocked and rolled, whipped its end around in the deep-rutted trail. It came abreast the rock. A shot crashed out, from behind a granite slab and one of the stage horses screamed, and went down with a bullet in its brain.

Bill Girard and his men popped up from behind the rocks and leveled rifles at the driver and the guard. Then the doors of the stage suddenly burst open and a wall of fire blasted from its interior. Bullets screamed and whined off the rocks. A million guns seemed to be exploding at once.

Bill Girard was knocked flat, and felt his left side go numb. He fell on his back and realized that the stage had been filled with fighting men. They had been ready. . . .

BEWILDERING, swirling chaos reigned for a moment. The outlaws, bullet riddled, were smashed back, then fell and died. Bill Girard saw Tim go down. And dimly, through the cloud of gunsmoke, he saw men come out of the stagecoach, guns blazing in their hands. He heard one of his own men yell, "Texas Rangers, by God!" Then a bullet cut the voice short.

Bill Girard raised his guns as he lay there, but another bullet knocked him back. A blinding sticky stream of blood ran down in his eyes. Shots, yells, the scream of lead, and the groans and curses of men reached his ears. He thought of Tim, lying there among the rocks, and tried weakly and blindly to crawl to him. He brushed the blood from his eyes, but new blood came to blind him again. He crawled on, groping for Tim, calling his name in a voice that even he, himself, could hardly hear.

Bill Girard didn't know where he was going. He only knew he was looking for Tim, the kid brother who had wanted excitement, who had talked Bill into letting him in on this stage robbery deal. . . .

Gradually, the sounds of fighting faded, and Bill wondered why, wondered if all his men were dead. He guessed they were, guessed he could do Tim no good now, so

he stopped crawling about and tried to stem the flow of blood wadding a 'kerchief about his head. He opened his eyes again and saw that he was nowhere near the scene of the fight. In his blindness he had crawled away from Tim instead of toward him.

Unsteadily, Bill rose to his feet. Down the trail, he saw the dust of the stage vanishing in the distance, and he staggered back to where the battle had taken place. There was no one among the rocks, and figured that the Rangers had taken the dead in for identification. Tim was dead. Bill guessed that when he saw him fall.

Tim gone! Tim dead! Bill Girard had known he had thought a lot of the kid, but not how much till now. He was going to miss Tim a hell of a lot. He was going to be haunted by the last sight of him there, being smashed back by Ranger bullets. For as long as he lived, Bill Girard knew he'd remember that the Texas Rangers had killed Tim. And Bill Girard would live only to even that. He'd kill those men who had been in the stage, if he could only find out who they were. And someway, he knew he'd manage to find out. . . .

He found a bronc the Rangers had missed, and he crawled weakly into the saddle. He swayed as he rode across the hills, till the shadows of night pressed down on him.

He wanted to stop, but he knew he shouldn't. He had to get somewhere, to get his wounds dressed. He was weak and dazed. Somehow, in his feverish distorted brain came the hallucination that he was a Texas Ranger. He thought he was riding beside Pete Yeager. He shook his head impatiently to rid his brain of such a crazy thing. Bill Girard a Ranger!

But the thought persisted. Through the fog that clouded his mind, Bill Girard could see himself, riding for the law. He could hear Pete Yeager talking to him, telling him the names of the men who had been in that stage coach. Pete would think that was a hell of a fine thing that they had done. Pete was mighty proud of being a Ranger!

THEN Bill Girard suddenly jerked awake, for the plan was opening up. He could almost hear the Rangers boasting about that slick stunt, and telling about what a hell of a fine organization they were. Bill Girard would fix that. He'd join the Rangers!

He didn't know exactly how, but he did know that sometime he'd have a chance—if he wore that badge—to bring a black mark to the outfit. He'd smear that Ranger badge with mud, and make the Rangers, for once, a name to be laughed at, to be sneered at. . . . Now he had one thing to live for—bring black and bitter disgrace to the proud name of that man-hunting organization. And he'd do it—at the same time settling in hot lead for Tim's death.

The night waned. The sun painted pink and crimson streamers in the sky. Bill stopped and stared at a string of riders that danced across his vision. He started to call out, to ride forward to get aid for the bullet hole in him. Then he stopped. His vision cleared a bit, and he saw that they were Indians. They were driving a bunch of horses before them—stolen horses, from somebody's outlying ranch. Their rifles glistened in the light of the early morning sun.

Slowly, cautiously, Bill Girard inched his horse back in the brush while the Indians filed past. Then he pressed on. He was fearfully weak, about done. The damned Rangers had about finished him too.

He finally saw smoke swirling upward from the rock chimney of a dobe cabin. He stopped at the door and started to climb off his horse. But he was too weak. He fell off on his face.

A man came out of the dobe, picked

Bill up and carried him inside. The jounce in the fellow's stride, as he carried Bill, seemed like a dream, as though he were floating on something.

When he was laid on the bed, he wanted to damn the Rangers aloud. But he kept thinking about Pete Yeager being able to tell him those names. He kept his mind on that while he was being bandaged. All he had to do was join the Rangers. Join the Rangers and he'd know them. . . .

"Who shot you?" the voice of the man came to Bill after awhile. "Them Indian devils that just raided my horses? Was it them?"

Bill's mind cleared a little then. He couldn't say Rangers had shot him. "Indians," he said weakly. "I saw 'em. They had a bunch of horses—headed south."

"I guessed that was it," said the fellow, "I'm sorry you got shot, mister, but I'm glad you saw which way they headed. There's some Rangers due in Cruses tomorrow. I've sent word for 'em to come out. They'll know where to look after they've talked to you."

Bill lay there for a little while, thought of the Rangers coming here. He was wounded, apparently by Indians. He had Pete Yeager's letter in his pocket. Now might be his time. . . .

"I'll be glad when these Rangers get here," Bill Girard said. "I was on my way to join 'em when I saw the Indians."

And not a single word of that was a lie. Bill had been on his way. He would join them as as soon as he could. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Lawman's Death Bargain

THAT day, that night, till the morning sun flowed softly into the tiny room where Bill Girard lay, he thought of himself as a Ranger, and of his learning who had been on that stage. Mentally, he pictured the men who had killed Tim, and hated the living guts of them. He even hated the very name of their organization.

He lay on the cot and felt the strength flow back into his body as he sipped the broth brought him by this starvation rancher who said his name was McGee. He listened to the beat of hoofs outside the cabin and tried to hide the lines of hatred in his face, for he knew the Rangers were here.

He looked at them curiously as they came in the door, then he was shaking hands with a fellow named Harker, who said he was the Ranger captain.

"McGee says you saw the Indians; that they shot at you," Harker said to Bill Girard, "and that you saw which way they headed. If we knew that we could save some time."

"They went south," Bill Girard told him. "About twenty-five or thirty of them, driving about fifty head of horses. They spotted me and I tried to run. One shot got me in the side, and one nicked my head. But they didn't chase me very far. Mebby they thought the horses were worth more than me."

Captain Harker nodded. He seemed to study Bill's face very carefully. "McGee says you told him you were on your way to join the Rangers," he went on. "Is that right?"

"That's right," said Bill Girard. "I got a letter from Pete Yeager who's an old friend of mine. He told me what a great job it was. He said I should get in. I decided to try it."

Captain Harker studied the light in Bill's eyes again. Bill hoped the Ranger couldn't fathom it. He knew that light was there in his eyes; the high light of hope, shining back of the blandness on his face. But that light was inspired by hate, by his ambition to become a Ranger only to do whatever he could to disgrace the entire body.

"Pete Yeager is outside now," Cap Harker said. "When we come in from getting McGee's horses, I'll talk to you about

getting in the Rangers. I need some good men, and you look like the right type. If Pete Yeager says you're good, I'll let you in."

"Ask Pete now," said Bill eagerly. "Ask him right away and I'll go with you after these Indians."

Bill imagined that would be a good thing to say. It proved to be, because Captain Harker smiled as though he knew the sort of fellows he wanted in the Rangers were the breed who didn't let a bullet hole in their hide keep them down.

"Can you make it?" asked Captain Harker.

"Sure I can make it," said Bill Girard.

To prove it, he swung his feet over the side of the bunk, stood up and stomped them.

"Good as new," he boasted.

Cap Harker smiled again. He knew damned well Bill Girard wasn't as good as new. He started to the door.

"Come on," he said. "I'll swear you in when we get to headquarters."

Bill felt high triumph as he went outside. He greeted Pete Yeager, who had been more than friendly to Bill on his visits to Wild Horse, the little town up in the hills where Bill used to go to sell his stolen horses.

Pete had been working in the store there, wrestling barrels of flour. He had listened to Bill tell his lies and Bill had liked him, maybe because Pete believed everything Bill said, because Pete trusted him. And now Bill had thought after Tim was shot that he'd hate Pete, just as he hated all the other Rangers. But he didn't. He shook Pete's hand and had the secret hope that Pete had not been on that stage; that Pete had had no hand in killing Tim.

Then they were in their saddles, heading across the hills. Bill's wound hurt, but he kept his back straight, kept his head high and knew he was making a hit. They knew he was shot pretty badly in the side, and they admired the grit of him as he rode on with them, uncomplaining, ready to do his bit.

Ready to do his bit. . . .

Bill knew that was the way they looked at it. They thought he was here for the same reason they were. But he was here to kill Rangers, and bring them to disgrace. Some dirty, law-spouting skunks who had killed Tim. . . .

BILL GIRARD made that trip and helped to get McGee's horses back to him. He made many other trips too. He fought Indians and outlaws; he settled feuds and chased rustlers. He slept on the ground and swam swollen streams and shivered under the bleak blasts of northers that swept down from the Panhandle flats. He grew gaunt and lean and hard as nails, and had new puckers in his hide in addition to the one made by the bullet the Rangers had fired into him that day of the stage holdup. He had killed men who were of the same outlaw clan he was, and told himself that he was doing it for Tim, because he hated the Rangers.

And now he had asked Pete Yeager who was on that stage when Tim was shot, and Pete had told him. There had been four of them. There was three now, because one of them had died. Bill Girard had seen him die in a battle with Indians down in the big hill country. He had died with so much courage that Bill found it hard to think that he hated him.

The three others were Haines, Walker, and Peterson. Their guns had blasted the lead that had swept through Tim. Bill leaned against the pole corral at Ranger headquarters where Captain Harker kept Company B of the Frontier Battalion, and wondered why he did not confront them now. Just three. He might be able to kill them and run. . . .

Strange, that Bill didn't do that. Strange, how chaotic was his mind when

he thought of everything; of his being in this Frontier Battalion of the Texas Rangers which Major John B. Jones was making so famous. Strange, that Bill was proud of that, of the things they'd done, of the things they were going to do. Funny how those doubts came to him when he thought of Haines and Walker and Peterson, the men he felt he must kill.

In his hate for these men he had pictured them as cowardly and vicious; but now he knew they were none of those things. He knew they were brave, because he had fought beside them. He knew they were unselfish because they had shared their last crust with him. But they had killed Tim. Somehow, nothing could erase that from Bill's mind. Tim was dead. And these men would pay. . . .

The sun slanted down across the peaks that edged the camp. Red streamers of crimson shot the sky with color. Bill stood there, leaning against the pole corral and marveled as he realized he'd hate to leave all this. He'd hate to quit being a Ranger, but he would quit when he killed those men. He'd hate to leave Della Harker, Captain Harker's daughter, and her little brother Jimmy. But he'd leave them too, when his guns sang their red song of death. . . .

He looked across the yard toward the captain's dobe office now and saw Della coming out the door. Jimmy was with her, and they both looked at him and smiled. Jimmy waved. But Bill didn't look at Jimmy! He kept looking at Della and had the sudden, sickening realization that he had already stayed too long with the Rangers. He had seen this girl, Della, too frequently and too many times had he seen the glory of the sun reflected on her hair. He had felt the touch of her hand against his own and marveled at the thrill of it. He'd marveled then, and wondered what it was. But now he knew. Now he knew he loved her; even as much as he had loved Tim. . . .

Bill watched her go from the office to the house she kept for her father and brother. He looked back at the office again and moved over to read a paper that was tacked on the door casement:

Attention Rangers:

Be on the lookout for the man known as Indian Slim. He is white, and about twenty years of age. He has black hair and black eyes and is tanned to a degree that gives him his nickname. He is wanted for murder, stage robbery, and is known to be a cold-blooded killer. There is a five thousand dollar reward, dead or alive. His true identity is not known.

C. E. Harker,
Capt., B Co., Frontier Battalion.

About twenty, with black hair and black eyes. . . . That would just about fit Tim, if he were alive. Perturbed by the stormy thoughts within him, Bill Girard moved away from the notice.

He looked across at the tents where the Rangers were quartered and saw Yaeger, Haines, Walker and Peterson in front of one. Three of those men had been on the stage when Tim was killed, and the sight of them boiled Bill's blood again. He couldn't let them notice that yet.

He went to the picket line and saddled his horse. He felt that he must get away for a while, to clear his brain and cool the fever of his blood. He rode across the hills, let his black mare race furiously, and the cool breeze fanned the blood lust from him. He slowed and let the mare prance slowly onto the sage-dotted flats, and the harsh-leafed mesquite whispered to him as he passed it. A picture of Della floated before his eyes. A vision of Haines and Walker and Peterson came to him. Men who would ride up to the door of death for their ideals. True men, staunch men. . . . And suddenly Bill knew he could not justly hate them. Yet he had sworn to kill them, to bring a blot of disgrace to the badge for which they would give their lives. . . .

BILL GIRARD stopped his horse as he saw the form of a rider coming toward him, a rider who stirred Bill with an alien and strange uneasiness.

He watched this rider closely now, and detected a tense furtiveness in him as he rode. He filled Bill with strange forebodings. The stranger was slim and rode his buckskin pony with an easy, careless grace. He came on, and Bill's heart pounded hard against his ribs as he stared at the tanned face of the intruder. It looked like Tim. It was Tim! And Bill Girard gave a shout and jumped his horse forward.

"Tim!" he called joyously rushing forward. "Tim!"

It was like a dream. It was as though there never had been any reality at all; as though that stage coach fight, Bill's joining the Rangers, the Indian battles and everything, were all wild imaginings as Bill came up to Tim. Down out of the saddle, he took him by the shoulders, shook him, held him off and looked at him, then hugged him as he patted his back.

"I thought you were dead, Tim," he told his brother as they finally squatted there on the ground. "I saw you go down. You fell all in a heap, like you were shot in the heart or head, maybe. I was blind with blood and I tried to crawl to you. But I crawled away instead. When I finally got there, I couldn't find you or anybody. I thought they'd taken your body in, and I joined the Rangers in order to get the men that killed you."

For a moment they sat there and looked at each other. Tim was leaner and harder, and his eyes held a more pronounced glitter of cruelty than they had held back there when he waited for the stage.

"I was creased on the head," Tim explained. "When I woke up the fight was still going on. I crawled to a hole I'd seen under one of the big rocks. I thought you were dead till I heard a fellow say something about Bill Girard being a Texas Ranger. So I hung around here to see if I could get a look at you."

Bill Girard didn't know why, but that poster back on the Ranger Captain's door came to his mind. Slim, dark, black hair, black eyes and wanted for murder. Indian Slim, the youthful bandit whose ruthless cruelty was known from one end of the state to the other in the past few months.

"Are you Indian Slim, Tim?" Bill asked suddenly.

Defiance flared in Tim's black eyes for a moment. Then he looked down at the sand between his boots. He made some marks on his boot-toe with his fore-finger.

"And what if I am?" he asked.

"If you are, you have to stop," said Bill Girard. "If you are, you'll wind up on the end of a rope or die in a fight with the Rangers. They'll get you just as sure as Fate, Tim. You have to stop, and you have to leave the country."

A bitter smile tinged Tim Girard's lips. His black eyes glittered as he looked up at Bill.

"Quit and leave!" he said bitingly. "How would I quit and where would I go? I go somewhere else and what's there? I quit, and I do what? I get chased everytime I stick my nose out of a hideout! I come here to you, Bill, with a proposition I thought I'd spring on you if you was really in the Rangers. I didn't think this law stuff had made you soft. But I guess I was wrong. I'll leave; but where I go it'll be just the same."

Bill knew that what Tim said was true. There was no place to go. There was nothing to do. The Rangers were cleaning up Texas. The Indians were on the run, and so were the outlaws. There was no place to go, unless Tim went to the Territories, and in the Territories, all this would happen again in just a little while.

"How about South America, Tim?" Bill asked. "Would you go there?"

"It takes money to go to South America," said Tim. "And I don't have any money. If you'd listen to my proposition I'd go there. If you'd listen to reason, maybe we could both go to South America and be all set after we get there."

Bill didn't ask Tim what his proposition was. He knew about what it would be. And he knew he'd do it, whether he wanted to or not, because he couldn't stand the thought of the Rangers getting Tim, of killing him, hanging him by the neck. . . .

"You get on as one of the guards on the old stage," Tim went on. "I'll be alone, and when I show up you hold your guns on the other Rangers or hit 'em on the head. That way there'll be no fight. Nobody'll get hurt, and we'll take the money and go to South America. Will you do this? Can you get on as a guard?"

Bill nodded. Captain Harker would grant him a request to be made a stage guard. He could throw his guns suddenly on the other guards. Two months ago he'd have jumped at the chance to do it, but now he hesitated. He thought of Della, of the Rangers, and then he thought of Tim with a rope around his neck.

"I'll be there, Tim," he said. "But it has to be understood that this is the last deal. From now on we go straight. There's a change taking place. The law is coming, and the outlaw is going. Nobody can stop it. Ten thousand men couldn't stop it. Is that a bargain, Tim?"

"That's a bargain," said Tim Girard.

But as he rode back toward the Ranger camp, Bill remembered the glitter of triumph he'd detected in Tim's eyes when he'd agreed to Tim's proposition. There was greed there, plain for Bill to see, and he wondered if Tim would really go away with him, to quit the dishonesty that Bill had learned did not pay. Bill hoped that he would, because he was giving up a hell of a lot to make it possible for Tim to leave. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Killer Returns

IN the evening dusk, Bill Girard rode into camp again. He stopped at the captain's dobe, where a light showed in the window. He went inside.

"I'd like a favor, Captain," he said. "I'd like to be made a guard on the gold stage from the Oro mines next trip."

Captain Harker looked at him keenly. "Any special reason, Bill?"

"No reason at all, I guess," Bill told him. "I just thought I'd like the change."

Harker nodded. "All right," he said. "You can leave with Williams, Peters, and Kendall. Leave here on the twenty-eighth."

Bill went out again. He'd known Harker would let him go. But somehow there was not the exhilaration that he had thought would come to him now. Instead he was depressed. He kept remembering the things the Rangers had done and thinking of the things they were going to do. He didn't want to rob a stagecoach now. He wanted to be honorable. He wanted the law to come, wanted it to stay, wanted the West to be decent; and it couldn't be decent as long as men escaped their just deserts for encroachments against the law.

All those things seemed alien and crazy to him. But he knew they were true. He had learned the worth of honesty, the value of justice and truth and decency. But he couldn't forget Tim. He couldn't let Tim hang on the end of a rope.

The night was still. The faint sound of hoofbeats came to Bill Girard's ears as he lay there in his tent. Captain Harker came from the house, talking to a man in buckskin who had ridden to his door.

"Indians headed toward Perry's Ford," he called.

The confusion of milling horses. The slap of saddles on sleek backs. The clink

of spurs. Then the line of Rangers rode through the gray of early dawn, Bill Girard in their midst. Twenty-four men, with the back straps of their newly issued Colts glistening in the pale light. Stern-visaged men who rode against odds.

They raced along while the sun peeped timidly atop the hills. Indians in big numbers, the word came back along the line, seeking revenge for their losses on the Brazos, at Lost Valley, and at Mason.

The country roughened. Giant crags rose ahead of them. A flat bench extended to the right and huge mesquite and brush waved as they passed. Then the mesquite and brush came to life. Naked savages leaped from behind the brushy concealment.

Mounted Indians raced toward the riding column, spears, rifles and shields in their hands, wild yells in their throats. They seemed to spring from everywhere as they rushed forward in a glistening, screaming avalanche that threatened to sweep entirely over the tiny column.

But the Rangers' new Colts, with their new metallic cartridges, were blasting now. The column of twenty-four swept forward, raced for the entrance of a narrow gorge that loomed ahead of them. A horse screamed, went down, and a Ranger fell. He leaped up behind another and rode on again, shooting behind him as they raced into the narrow mouth of the pass.

There they turned; their guns blasted a rapid fusillade again, and the Indians fell back. Quickly, they barricaded themselves behind the rocks that nestled at the pass. The Indians retreated under that blaze of fire, but the Rangers were bottled there. Captain Harker paced back and forth behind the rocks, looked at the sun that soared slowly overhead. Loudly, above the crack of rifles that filled the gorge with sound, he called to the men.

"This is not the war party that was headed for Perry's Ford," he called. "This party was headed to join them. I know that because the messenger said the main party was coming from the south. These came from the west.

"This puts us in a hole," he went on. "It puts Perry's Ford in a hole too. We can lick these Indians here, but by the time we do it, Perry's Ford will be wiped out! Three men can hold this pass as well as twenty. I won't order any men to do it. Whoever stays here now will keep on staying here. But I'd like three men to volunteer. Three men who believe the State of Texas is worth dying for; who believe that the law is here to stay, and are willing to die to help it. Raise your hands, three men who will stay."

Twenty-three hands shot into the air. Bill Girard's hand was up, with the others. That was crazy, but he couldn't help it.

Captain Harker smiled softly, and turned his head away for a moment. "That whips me fellows," he said softly. "I'm in the same fix I was in before. We'll draw straws."

The short pieces of sticks were secured. Captain Harker held them. He drew one himself from old Hal Deering's hand before he held them for the others. They drew, one after another, and the three who stayed were Deering, Haines and Walker.

Two of them were men who had been on the stage when Tim had been shot. And Bill Girard watched them take their places with Deering at the mouth of the pass. He saw the smile on their faces, the wave of their hands as the rest of the column moved on. Those three would die in one, two, or three hours. No monument would be erected to mark the place they fell. Their monument would be in the hearts of the men who had ridden away and left them there.

And Bill Girard smiled softly as he rode along. To think that he had once thought that he could kill men like those back there. . . !

ON they raced, a battle before them, a battle behind them. Up, over the hills behind which Perry's Ford lay, heroes to be made, with a vision of the heroes behind them in their eyes, they galloped down into the village with the screams of Indians they had beaten to their prey by a margin of seconds!

Then rifles cracked again. Men died, and women took up their tasks as the Rangers fought with that cold ferocity that had already made them famous.

Madly, Bill Girard battled there till his rifle grew hot, till his ammunition was exhausted. Then his pistols cracked, and the oily, black-powder smoke hung about his grimed and bloody face like a wreath. He saw Captain Harker go down with a bullet in his leg. He saw Pete Yeager lift him up, and the two of them fought, each supporting the other. A bullet tore Bill's side and knocked him flat. He rose and an arrow burned his neck. And still he fought, as all the others were fighting, to preserve Texas.

Then it was quiet. The Indians were gone, and Perry's Ford was saved. Bill Girard was down, wounded, but with the thrill of victory in his blood, a song of triumph in his heart; a song that died as he thought of Tim. Soon he would leave all this. Soon Bill Girard would be an outlaw. Soon his name would be on the list carried by Captain Harker. Bill Girard, wanted, for stagecoach robbery. . . .

Dazedly, while he was carried to a wagon, while he was carted back to Ranger Headquarters, he wondered if the duty to Tim was stronger and more binding than his duty to Texas. He counted the days—five—till the last of the month, and wondered if he would be well enough to go as a stage guard. He fretted as he lay in bed at the Ranger camp and knew that he was too weak to ride. He worried as the days crept on, and he knew he was still unable to travel.

Bill Girard swung his feet over the bed edge. He had to go because Tim would be there! He swayed as he sat there and pulled on his boots. He staggered as he walked. He opened the door as Della Harker came across the yard. She stopped in front of him, put her hands up on his arms and tried to push him back.

"You're sick, Bill," she said. "Go to bed. You must. Right away."

Bill Girard shook his whirling head stubbornly. Tim was out there. Tim would be killed. Tim might kill a Ranger. If Bill could go neither of those things would happen.

"I have to go with the stage," he muttered. "This is the twenty-eighth!"

He tried to push past her, but she held him. He kept on trying and Della called out. There men swam dizzily in front of his eyes. He felt their hands on him. He felt himself lifted, being carried back to bed.

"He's out of his head," somebody said. "Have Cap, give him something."

Out of his head! Yes, that was it! Damn near out of his head, with Tim going to be killed, with Tim going to kill a Ranger. . . .

Then he was quiet, for he knew it was no use. His futile strength was nothing. Even if they let him go, he'd never be able to make the trip. He lay quiet and drank the medicine the Captain brought. He listened to the horses that left the yard—the three to guard the stage. . . .

A day passed, and one more. This was the thirtieth, the last day, the day the stage came! Tim would be there, trying to rob it alone. . . .

Misery, helplessness and sorrow pressed down on Bill Girard. He was stronger now. The stage guards should be back. Gaunt, haggard and hollow-eyed, he dressed and made his way to the front of the house and watched the trail down which the stage guards would come. The sun climbed high, started its fall.

Then they came, but there were four—not three. Bill Girard's heart beat fast in his breast as he watched. Four guards. . . .

He watched them dismount at the captain's office. He saw the young fellow, dark-faced, black-haired and black-eyed, being led into the office, and knew it was Tim. Tim was captured.

They came out of the office after a while, and Bill saw them lead Tim to the dobe jail. They locked the door. Della came out of the office and walked over to where Bill sat.

"They tried to hold up the stage," she told him. "They killed three of the bandits, and captured one. It's Indian Slim."

Bill didn't say anything. After Della had gone on in the house, he kept his eyes on the jail. Three men dead. . . . That was funny when Tim had said he would be alone. Rangers, walking across the yard, stopped to talk to Bill as they passed. They all mentioned Indian Slim being caught. They cursed him. They recounted his crimes, his cruelty, his callous killings. . . . .

"That's one dirty murderer," they said, "that nobody will be sorry to watch hang."

Just one man would be sorry, and that was Bill Girard. But his Ranger friends blamed the lines on his face on the pain of his wound. They thought the shadows in his eyes were there because of weakness. They told Bill they hoped he'd be up and around soon. They missed him, they said. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood On His Badge

AN endless day, it seemed to Bill, as he sat there on the porch and watched the dobe jail where Tim was locked. Tim probably thought that Bill had double-crossed him, and Bill wanted to tell him that he hadn't. He wanted to tell him that he'd tried like hell to come when he said he would.

Evening came and shadows crept across the yard. They reminded him of the dark shadowed thoughts that crowded his mind, and the thought of Tim, hanging on the end of a rope. If Tim were to hang, it would be Bill's fault. . . .

Darkness came and presently the lights in the tents went out. Bill went to his bed and lay there awake. He waited a couple of hours, then he rose and got a heavy file from the box on the porch. He thrust it in his waistband and limped across the clearing. In the darkness at the side of the dobe jail he stopped and whispered through the bars.

There was no answer. He whispered again, and a movement came from inside the dobe and Tim's face showed faintly behind the bars. Bill reached up to thrust the file in to him.

"Get away and head south, Tim," he said. "Try to make it to some other country, boy. That's the only way. You'll not be safe anywhere here."

"And where were you when the stage came along?" asked Tim Girard. "I thought you were going to be there?"

Bill was going to ask Tim how come he had some men with him, when he'd said he would be alone. But he didn't. Maybe Tim got leary of one man tackling a job like that. It made no difference, anyway. The only thing that mattered was that Tim would hang. . . .

"I was laid up," Bill told him. "I was in bed. I tried, Tim."

"Get me a gun," said Tim. "I'll need one."

"No," said Bill. "I don't want you to kill a Ranger, Tim, or I don't want a Ranger to have to kill you. If they corner you without a gun, all you do is come back to jail. If they corner you with one, they'll kill you!"

"I don't want a gun to kill a Ranger," Tim whispered. "I'll need it for Indians.

I'll have to head through Indian country south of here. Get me a gun and I'll promise not to use it on a Ranger."

Bill tiptoed away again. He moved slowly because of the guard and because of his wound. He limped into the house and got an extra gun from his roll at the foot of the bed. Then he limped out and crept again through the shadows. He slipped up to the window and handed the gun through the bars. He kept his hand inside after Tim took the .45 and gripped Tim's hand.

"Go straight, boy," he said. "That sounds funny, I know. But I've learned a lot since I've been with the Rangers. I've learned that the things we laughed at are real. They're the only things that really count. Go straight when you get away, and send me a letter from wherever you stop."

Bill limped away. He went stealthily into the house again, lay awake and listened. He watched a faint tinge of gray come into the eastern sky. He guessed Tim had gotten away without being seen.

Then a shot broke the dawn stillness. A wild yell came from the guard at the picket line, and another shot came out of the silence. The shrill scream of Della's voice brought Bill up out of his bed. He pulled on his boots, limped out on the porch and saw a horseman galloping across the flats to the east.

A sprawled form, still and motionless, was in front of the jail. The picket-line guard was rising, raising his rifle to his shoulder, and Della Harker was running toward him. She reached him and knocked the rifle down as it shot. Her voice came to Bill Girard as he limped forward.

"Don't shoot," she called. "He's got Jimmy! He said if we chased him he'd kill Jimmy!"

Men ran out of their tents and Captain Harker came out of the house, Bill Girard looked over at the sprawled form in front of the dobe jail. The form was Pete Yeager, and he was dead. Della Harker's voice came to Bill's ears again. Dazedly, he listened while he knew that Tim had done this. He had killed Pete Yeager; he had shot the picket guard. He had stolen Jimmy, Della's little brother, and said he'd kill him if he was pursued. . . .

"Jimmy and I always go riding early," Della was sobbing. "We came out of the house and started toward the picket line. Indian Slim came around the side of the jail and he had a gun in his hand. He looked past Jimmy and me, at Pete Yeager who was just coming over in front of the jail. Pete didn't even carry a gun. He had a water bucket in his hand and he just stood there and looked at Indian Slim.

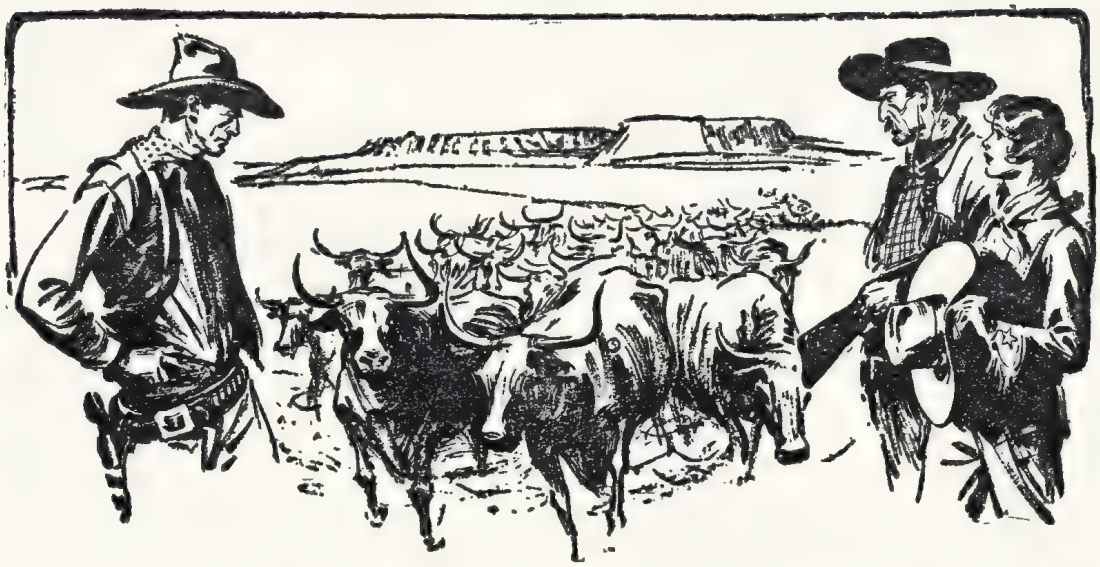
"Indian Slim said: 'A damned Ranger!' and shot Pete without any warning. The picket guard yelled and started to shoot at Indian Slim and Slim shot him too. Then he made a run at Jimmy and pushed me away from him. He told me he was taking Jimmy for safe keeping. He said he knew he was the Captain's brat. He said he'd kill Jimmy if anybody chased him before two days."

Della stopped talking and her sobs were broken by the mutter of angry voices. Bill Girard felt suddenly cold and uncomfortable. Tim had done this; he had killed Yeager. He had done it callously, viciously. And, as he'd shot, he'd said, "A damned Ranger."

BILL GIRARD limped back to the porch and sat down heavily. He wanted to get away from the talk, from the things that were said about this outlaw called Indian Slim. Those things hurt Bill more now than they ever had before, because he was beginning to know they were true. Tim was different; he'd changed more than Bill had realized. He was everything they called him. Callous, heartless, cold-blooded and cruel. . . .

Della was in the house now, and she

(Continued on page 150)



Up The Trail

STEVE KIPP adjusted the mask he had made out of his black silk neckscarf and looked at his reflection in the cracked mirror fastened to the log wall above the wash bench. He saw a pair of hard, gray-blue eyes. The rest of his face, from the crown of his old Stetson to down below his jaw, was concealed. A long black saddle slicker, buttoned from the neck down, completed the disguise.

"That'll do," he spoke aloud to his reflection, his voice dry, harsh, a little muffled by the black silk cloth. He was disguising his voice as well as his appearance, rehearsing his grim role.

He had cut away the lining of his slicker pocket, so that he could get to his holstered six-shooter and gun belt underneath. Now he slid the gun out with a quick, smooth draw.

"It's a hold-up, gents! Reach for the ceilin'! I don't want to hurt nobody. But I'll shoot to kill if you crowd me. Shove your money in this sack, bank man!"

The cabin door behind him swung open, letting in a heavy blast of wind and snow.

Steve Kipp whirled, the six-shooter in his right hand, an empty gunnysack in his left.

A girl in beaverskin coat and cap stood just inside the open doorway, Her dark eyes, a little glazed by the blizzard, stared at the masked figure in the black slicker. His gun was covering her. She recoiled, stepping backwards. Then, with a moan, she collapsed on the pine board floor. . . .

It was prophetic, that meeting of Steve Kipp and the gray-eyed schoolmarm, under the shadow of guns. Ahead, in their lives, was powdersmoke and war—at the tragic crossed trails of love and hate. . . . Walt Coburn, the cowboy author, will tell the story next month in a complete, man-sized novel, "Last Stand of the Freeze-Out Pool." And there'll be other vigorous dramatic novelettes and short stories by Farrell, Cody, Dawson, and others!

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(Continued from page 148)

was sobbing. She was telling her father that Jimmy had been scared, but he had called to her when Indian Slim had lifted him up on his horse.

"He was brave," she said, her voice coming to Bill. "He called to me, 'Don't worry about me, Sis. I can take care of myself. I'm a Ranger.' Then Indian Slim cursed him took him away."

Bill listened to Harker's voice, comforting Della, and he listened to the mutter of resentful voices from the tents. But nobody chased Indian Slim. Two days, Slim had said, and so they waited two days. Those two days that were filled with awful misery for Bill Girard. Awful misery in the knowledge that Tim was what he was; and anxiety over little Jimmy, Della's kid brother.

Surely Tim wouldn't hurt Jimmy! But what would he do with him after two days? What would Jimmy do if Tim would finally set him free?

The monotonous sound of Captain Harker's boots as he continually paced the floor in his house reached his ears. He wanted to get up, to go in there and admit that he had let Tim loose. He wanted to tell them that. He was responsible for Jimmy being gone, responsible for Pete Yeager being dead, for Della sobbing, for Harker's worry as he paced back and forth wondering what had become of his son. He wanted to tell them to kill him, to shoot him, to hang him. . . .

But he couldn't do that. That wouldn't bring Jimmy back, nor would that catch Indian Slim. All it would do would be to break Della's heart again. . . .

At the end of the second day, the Rangers saddled their horses and galloped away. Later, they straggled back again, forlorn, tired and dispirited, with the sag of defeat in their shoulders. And with heavy heart Bill Girard watched them come.

Another day and Bill limped out to

saddle a horse. Captain Harker came out to him. "You're not fit to go, Bill," he said. "You'd never make a long ride. I appreciate you're wanting to go, but I can't let you do it."

He appreciated Bill wanting to go. . . ! How ironic that was to Bill Girard as he looked at the hellish misery in Captain Harker's eyes.

Bill limped back to the porch again. Another day came, and again the haggard riders came back to camp. Their faces were drawn. They passed their captain without looking at him. They didn't want him to see the failure in their eyes.

Three days were gone, and Bill Girard limped down the picket line again. There was no one but the guard in camp, for the men were all out. The guard eyed the rifle in Bill Girard's hand and the belt of guns about his waist.

He stepped in front of him as Bill came to the horses. "I can't let you take one, Bill," he said. "Cap said you wasn't fit to travel. He said to keep you here. I'm going to keep you."

But Bill kept on going.

He stooped under the picket rope and loosed a halter strap from it. He picked up a saddle and slapped it on the back of his long-legged black mare. The guard came over, reached up to pull the saddle off again, but he stepped back as he looked at the fire in Bill Girard's sunken eyes.

"What the hell's got into you, Bill?" he asked. "You know I'd let you go if I could."

"You'll let me go anyhow," said Bill Girard positively. "I'm going now! You can stop me if you kill me, but that's the only way!"

A DEEP and haunting horror came to his eyes as he visioned the thing he was going to do, something that he would never have believed himself capable of doing. He was going to bring Tim in!

(Continued on page 152)

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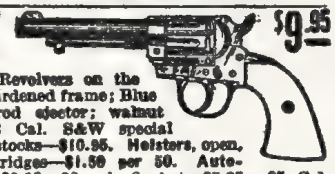

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(Continued from page 151)

Bill knew he himself would suffer when he did that; maybe he would suffer at the hands of the law, as well as from the remorse of his deed, but he was willing to have that happen. He was willing now to let them discover that he was Indian Slim's brother, that he had been crooked, had been a thief. He was willing for anything to happen, in order to get little Jimmy Harker back safely to his father and Della. For Bill knew the bitter pain of realization that Tim was not as he had pictured him. Tim was keeping Jimmy, or had killed him. And either of those things damned Tim forever in Bill's eyes. Either of those things made Bill Girard realize the force of what Captain Harker had said back there in the canyon, when three men had volunteered to give their lives so that the others might keep on fighting.

"Men who believe in the future of Texas. Men who believe that the law has come to stay. Men who are willing to die to make their ideals come true."

Those things, and the things that Bill Girard had learned about honor, and decency, that the welfare of the many was better than the greed of the few.... Those things, and what he was going to do, made him know that at last he had risen to the level of those other men, the men with whom he'd fought shoulder to shoulder.

He knew where to find Tim. He was sure that Tim would be at their old hideout in the Wild Horse hills.

The hills rose high ahead of him and the mountains grew rocky. Night came, but still Bill pushed on, till he swayed so dizzily in the saddle that he had to hold to the saddle horn.

The black mare ate the miles like a smoothly running machine. Her stride was easy, effortless, as Bill hit the wooded country. He climbed up to where the old familiar landmarks greeted his eyes. He

slowed his pace then and moved forward cautiously.

Night came again and Bill stopped just a few miles from where he knew the camp to be. The hills were silent. There was no evidence of human habitation.

Bill moved forward again with the dawn. He was worn and weak now. He wondered if he could do it. He parted the brush and looked at the partially hidden cabin in the hills. It appeared empty; no smoke came from the chimney. He waited an hour, but still nothing moved. A sense of failure pervaded him.

He moved forward cautiously, walking with the mare's reins held loosely in his left hand. He came to the door and pushed it open. He stepped inside and saw the old empty room. He started to take another step, and stopped as something hard and round and cold was thrust against the back of his neck.

"Put up your hands and stand still," said a voice.

That voice was strange. It was not Tim's!

CHAPTER FIVE

Gun-Trail's End

BILL GIRARD said, "Sure, I'll put up my hands. What's all the fuss about?"

He started to raise his hands. A voice, a tiny, partly smothered voice, came to him from behind a closed door.

"Bill!" Jimmy's voice came to him. "I'm in here!"

The gun-muzzle pressed hard against Bill's neck, and Bill's hands kept moving slowly upward. Then he ducked, dropping like a rock. His feet swung around as he hit the floor, and a gun exploded above his head. His feet, striking out, knocked the legs from under the man behind him.

Bill pulled one of his pistols as the fel-

(Continued on page 154)

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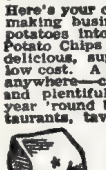

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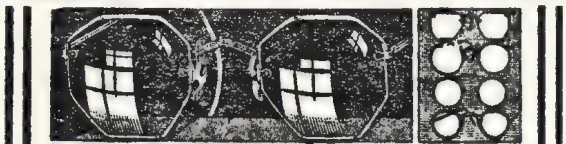

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(Continued from page 153)

low sprawled on the floor. The fellow tried to shoot again, but Bill let the hammer fall from under his thumb. The bullet knocked the man back, and he lay there with a crimson stream running out from under his body.

Bill Girard let his gun hand down to rest on the floor. He heard a knocking at the closed door where Jimmy's voice had come through. He crawled to it and lifted the bar that held it in place.

Jimmy came out, looked at the dead man, then at Bill, and managed a weak grin.

"I knew you'd come," he said confidently. "I know somebody'd come."

Jimmy looked like he'd been crying. His eyes were red. His face was pale. His voice wasn't any too steady.

"Can you find your way back to the Ranger camp, Jimmy?" Bill asked him. "Did you notice the trails when you were brought up here?"

Jimmy nodded.

"I noticed everything," Jimmy said. "I always do that. I can find my way back, easy!"

"My horse is outside," Bill went on. "Get on it and ride like hell, Jimmy! Get away from here and bring your father back. Bring back any Ranger you can find."

Jimmy looked at Bill as if the kid was worried about him, then he went out the door. The sound of the horse's hoofs came back to Bill, and he smiled. That was that. Jimmy was gone, and he'd get back. Bill lay there, his back propped up against the wall, and rested. He hoped his wound would clot again.

The place grew still, and Bill thought of how happy Della would be to see Jimmy. He thought of Tim, and then tried not to think of him. He wondered where Tim was.

An hour passed and he grew stronger. The rest was doing him good. His wound

stopped bleeding and a faint sound stirred the silence outside the cabin. The door swung inward, and Tim stepped inside. He stopped and looked at Bill, propped against the wall, bloody and pale, his gun lax in his hand. He looked at the dead man.

Then Tim seemed to sabe everything in just that few seconds. He seemed to read the determination in Bill's face.

"So that's it!" Tim said. "You killed Pinto, and you sent the kid away after help. You're sure gone law-dog in earnest!"

"That's it," said Bill.

"Mebby you think you're going to arrest me," Tim said. "Mebby you're that crazy!"

Bill nodded. "I'm just that crazy, Tim," he said. "You've gone too far. You killed a man you didn't need to kill. You stole a boy. You broke a girl's heart. I'm going to take you back. I'll do it if I go to jail, too. I'll either do it or make you kill me. That's as sure as Fate, Tim. Nothing can change it."

Tim's face got pale. He looked at Bill. "Try and take me back," he said, then leaped back toward the door.

Bill staggered erect, moved to the door and raised his gun as he saw Tim ride out of the clearing. Bill shot, and Tim's horse fell. Tim picked himself up off the ground, watching Bill coming toward him, staggering, not raising the gun in his hand.

"Either kill me or come back with me, Tim," Bill said again. "It's the only thing to do. I'll take my medicine and you take yours."

Tim raised his gun, then lowered it again. He ran back in the brush and Bill staggered after him. Tim shot, and Bill felt the wind of the bullet.

"I'll kill you, Bill," Tim yelled. "I'll do it sure as hell if you don't stop!"

Bill didn't answer. There wasn't any answer.

(Continued on page 156)

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(Continued from page 155)

RANGERS were supposed to die; they were supposed to do their duty. Criminals were supposed to pay. Tim had his chance. He'd killed Pete Yeager because he was a "damned Ranger." He hadn't needed to kill him. He hadn't needed to kidnap Jimmy. He hadn't needed to kill most of the times when he had killed. . . .

Tim kept backing away, and Bill kept coming on, bloody, tattered, weak and dizzy, but inflexible as rock. And as he came, the hurt of it all was in his eyes. This thing he had to do was more hellish than the thing that Tim had to face.

Then Tim stopped. He looked behind him at the yawning chasm that dropped down two hundred feet below. He looked at Bill; he raised his gun, then lowered it again. His face paled and his eyes burned strangely. Seemingly, he studied each slow step that Bill made toward him, and each separate line of bitterness in Bill's haggard face. Maybe he looked into Bill's soul and read the heartache there, all the misery and utter hell that was tearing at his brother's vitals. And Tim smiled. Bill had never seen that kind of smile on Tim's face before, for it was a smile of human understanding; the smile of a man who realizes at last that his course was run, and that it had been rotten and worthless and futile. Bill Girard stopped in his tracks.

"I think I sabe, Bill," said Tim suddenly. "I—I think I've got it figured."

Then he took a step backward. Tim tried to make it look accidental. But Bill knew Tim had realized just where he was standing. He saw that soft smile on Tim's lips as he vanished. And after a moment, heard dimly the soft, sickening thud that told him that Tim had paid for his crimes.

Bill stood there and stared for a moment. The bitter lines deepened about his tight-pressed lips. Misery and sorrow in his eyes, he staggered back to the cabin

(Concluded on page 158)

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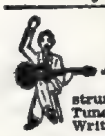

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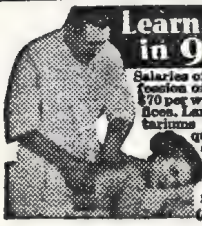

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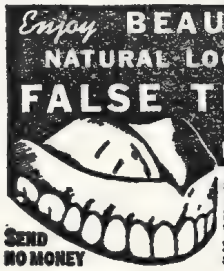

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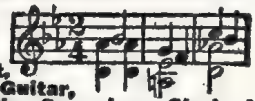

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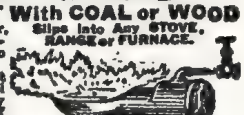

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(Continued from page 156)

and propped himself against the wall. Tim was gone; Tim had paid. Hurt, full of misery, Bill waited. . . .

Della knelt beside him, helped with his wounds. She pushed the damp hair back from his brow. When his wounds were bandaged, the Rangers left the room and they were alone, he and Della. Her hand was in his.

And then stern, remorseless duty pressed down on Bill Girard again; the duty that had made him go forward when he wanted to turn back; the duty that had made him know that Tim must pay and that he, too, should pay, as Tim had.

But Bill didn't speak, for he heard Della's voice again. "You'll never know how grateful we are to you, Bill," she said. "For bringing Jimmy back to us."

Bill closed his eyes. He thought of Tim, of losing and finding him. He thought of that horrible walk forward, when he had known he must take Tim in, to keep him from further killings; to save lives and broken hearts. . . . And he thought of Tim, finally having it all figured out, then stepping back into oblivion. In that last moment even Tim had known and felt the things that drove Bill on.

"You'll never know," came Della's voice again. "Because you do not have a brother to lose, and to find again."

That conflict of duty waged its war in Bill. Tim had died to pay, to save him. Perhaps his duty lay here, with the Rangers, to keep on fighting; to keep on offering his life in order to make the coming of the law certain; to make Texas bigger, better, cleaner. . . .

"No," said Bill Girard softly. "I—I don't have a brother, Della."

And the ghosts of those Ranger heroes who had died for Texas, seemed to nod their approval to Bill Girard. It was not what a man had been. It was what he was willing to be. . . .

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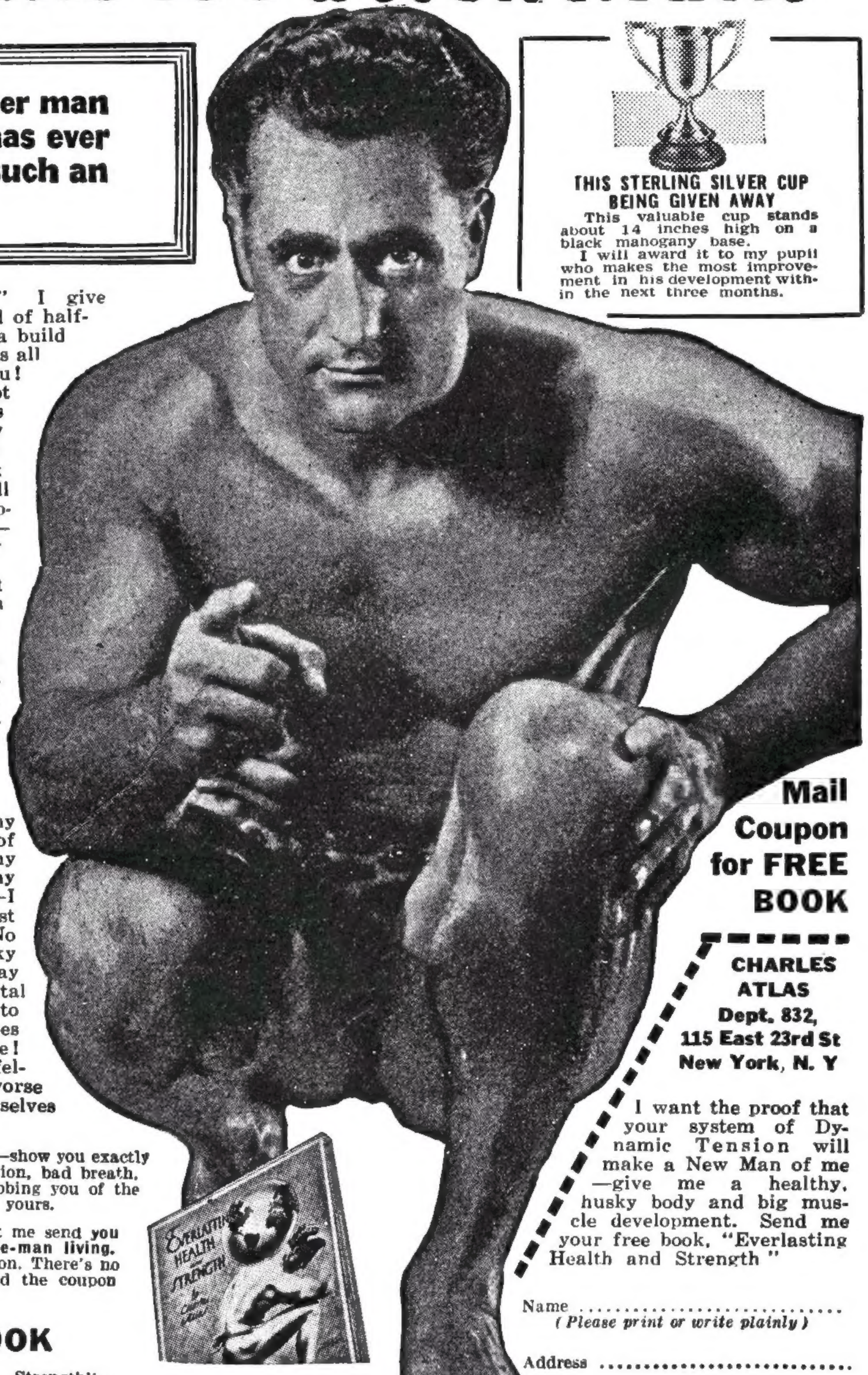

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